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# THE NEW REPUBLIC

## PRESIDENT BAKER

## {FOUR MORE YEARS?}

*by Sidney Blumenthal*

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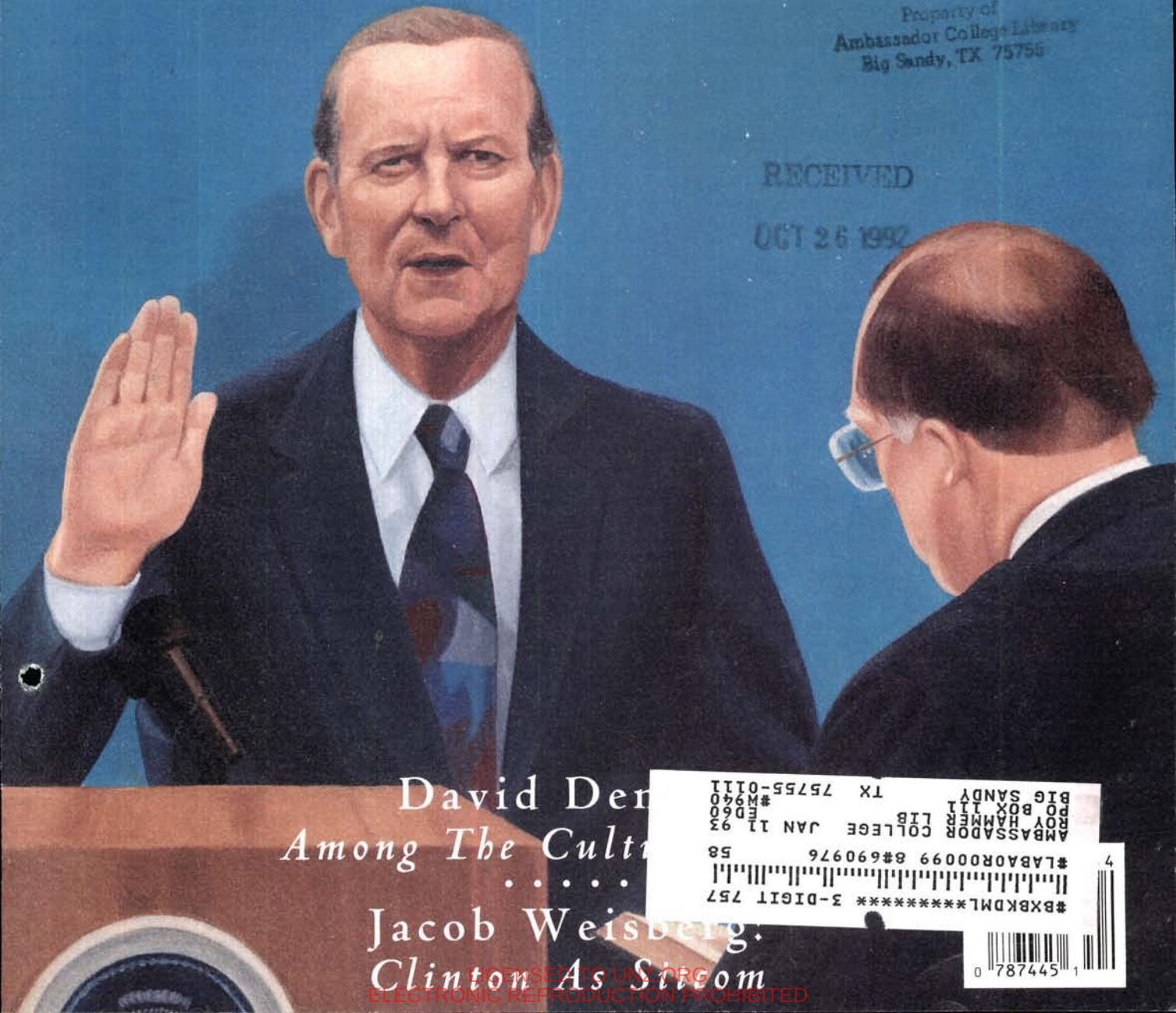

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# THE NEW REPUBLIC

*A Weekly Journal of Opinion*

**NOVEMBER 2, 1992**

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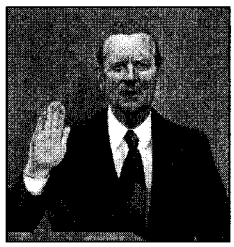

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# CORRESPONDENCE

## Bar none

**To the editors:**

I am a regular reader of TNR and greatly respect the intellectual honesty and open-minded approach that the magazine brings to public policy issues. It is because of my great respect for the magazine that I was so disappointed to find Marjorie Perloff's "Mommy Dearest" (October 5) in it. I was especially astounded by the blatant lies and unfounded accusations in the article because my mother is the first cousin of President Bush and I am very close to the First Family.

First of all, I have never known my cousin Doro, the daughter to whom Perloff refers, as being called "Dordie," nor for that matter has she. Second, the attack on the lack of books in the household of the First Lady is not simply a stretch of the truth—it is an utter lie. Last summer I had seven books to read for my senior year in high school. In spending most of my summer with the family in Kennebunkport, I discussed most of them with my Aunt Bar. Not only did she have most of the books on my reading list, but she offered key insights that I never could have perceived on my own.

As for Perloff's claim that Barbara Bush "didn't spend very much time with her children," I am not sure which Barbara Bush Perloff thinks she knows. The Barbara Bush I know spends countless hours with her grandchildren, reading to them, taking walks with them, swimming with them, going on bike rides with them, etc. As anyone who knows her will attest, Barbara Bush is kind, caring, compassionate, warm, and loving.

Yet Perloff's article contradicts this. What conceivable reason would she have for spreading these mistruths? Is she contemptuous of people who have been successful in life—or is she just a resentful, jealous, spiteful individual? What did Barbara Bush ever do to deserve such a personal, out-of-bounds attack? I know Barbara Bush better than all of you combined. She is a member of my family and you are wrong.

WALKER R. STAPLETON
*Williamstown, Massachusetts*

**To the editors:**

Have you lost your minds? While inquiring minds might wish to know whether Barbara Bush was a good mom in 1968, I cannot imagine that TNR would dedicate a paragraph, much less two-and-a-half pages, to Marjorie Perloff's screed. What's next, former high school boyfriends of Hillary Clinton talking about how far they got with her?

BERT H. DEIXLER
*Los Angeles, California*

## Disingenuous

**To the editors:**

The heavy slanting of your editorial line against feminist and multiculturalist intellectual developments is itself the best argument against the naive, often disingenuous liberal stance for a free marketplace of ideas. I have yet to see an extended presentation in TNR of what feminist theory is and how and why it has developed by someone well versed in the field. Yet you consider feminist theory important and dangerous enough to publish frequent attacks by its most provocative, least even-handed antagonists, including show-boating Camille Paglia, and now, Christina Hoff Sommers in "Sister Soldiers" (October 5).

I cannot argue with Sommers's description of the National Women's Studies Association convention because, like many if not most feminist academics, I am not a member and was not there. But she is wrong to assume that such a conference offers a fair portrayal of feminist scholarship in general, or to claim that feminists now control university administrations and curriculum. The fact is that women, not to mention feminists, are poorly represented in university administrations and the higher-ranking and -paying faculty positions; there is no statistical question about it. It is also still possible to graduate from college without ever hearing a word about women or minorities, since most faculty members continue to assume that the "universal liberal idea of a culture of humanity" need not include them; and since courses that attempt to extend the traditional canon of dead white European males and challenge the racist and sexist assumptions that have caused the canon to be so exclusive are rarely required of any students.

CLAIRE DETELS
*Associate Professor,*
*University of Arkansas*
*Fayetteville, Arkansas*

**To the editors:**

Hats off to Christina Hoff Sommers for blowing the whistle on the radical feminist debasement of America's universities. The charlatans she observed in Austin have begun to remodel our public schools as well.

Peggy McIntosh of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, a gender feminist "think" tank, has lec-


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tured throughout the country on radical feminist school reform in a program of "re-educating faculty." She believes that "exact thinking" and "excellence" are characteristics of white males that have made them, "especially the blond ones, dangerous to themselves and others in the nuclear age." Women and minorities, she teaches, learn better in "collaboratives." McIntosh was one of the contributors to "How Schools Shortchange Girls," a report by the American Association of University Women advocating a feminist transformation of schooling.

McIntosh has lectured the teachers of Brookline, Massachusetts, and our assistant superintendent of curriculum has publicly endorsed her theories. Academically minded teachers have resisted pressure to implement McIntosh's baseless ideas, but others have caved in. For instance, a few years ago my daughter was placed with children of lesser attainment in math and given a collective grade based on the total number of problems solved by her group, a misguided technique that made a 9-year-old child responsible for her school's failure to bring her peers up to speed. So parents beware.

DAVID M. STILLMAN
*Brookline, Massachusetts*

## Bosses

**To the editors:**

In "Our Party" (October 5) Betty Friedan implies that to be "woman" is to stand for better "health care legislation, child care, parental leave, and for laws protecting the environment, education, housing, and the elderly." She offers absolutely no proof that this argument holds water, nor does she provide examples of legislation presented by women that would back her statements.

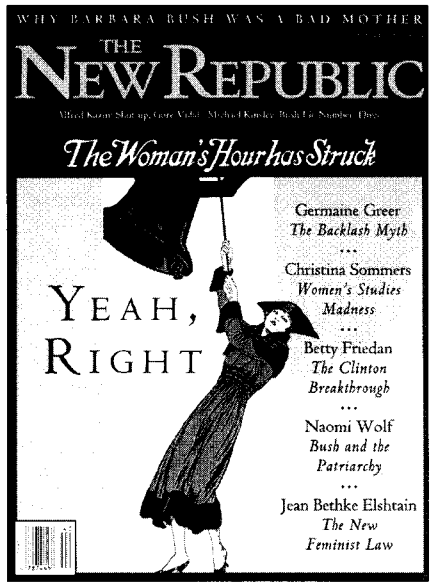
There are fifty-nine Republican and ninety-five Democrat women running for the House. Surely the women from these two parties have different views, and child care and parental leave are only a couple of issues in a political spectrum. What is frightening is when we allow ourselves to apply a set of values to a politician because she is a woman, and forget to listen to who she really is, and what she really stands for, and whether she is inclined to abuse the banks, vote no on bills because of abortion language, support genocide in foreign lands, or yield to political patronage by automobile companies over fuel standards.

PATRICK OBERMAN
*Clinton, Maryland*

**To the editors:**

That the women in Betty Friedan's think tank back in USC wanted to do a series of television spots warning of the consequences of a Bush presidency on the Supreme Court in 1988 is laudable. They might have had little impact on the outcome of the race, but their raison d'être was to make an important point. But then she says that "the Dukakis campaign refused to let us do it." Ms. Friedan, empowerment is not something someone gives to you, it is something you make for yourself. If you were so all fired up about these ads, why didn't you just raise the funds to run them through your organization? If they were as important to make as you believe (and I agree that they were), you could have found the money. In this country, you need no one's permission to say what you want, "bosses" notwithstanding.

DOUGLAS C. ALEXANDER
*Atlanta, Georgia*




## Moral clarity

**To the editors:**

I am shocked by TNR's essay about the "moral clarity" of the cold war, and your assertion that during that halcyon time "keeping Somalia barely civilized was a simple task," requiring no more than supporting longtime dictator Siad Barre ("New World Disorder," September 21). The implication is that savagery broke out in Somalia only when the civilizing influence of Siad Barre ended with his ouster in January 1991. In fact, Siad's twenty-year reign decimated the country, paving the way for the carnage and famine we see today. Through torture, political imprisonment, and murder, Siad demolished all vestiges of civil society over the years. At the time he was overthrown, Somalis had no independent labor unions, professional associations, or political parties. Not surprisingly, the military forces that eventually ousted him had no commitment to political compromise and no experience at governing. Moreover, Barre had solidified his harsh rule by rewarding members of his own clan at the expense of others—a process designed to create the ethnic strife that wracks the country today—and undermined Somalia's traditional clan structure through violence, intimidation, bribes, and infiltration.

TNR indulges Siad Barre's abuses by describing them as "slight." It is hard to imagine what you would consider substantial: in late 1989 Siad conducted a military campaign against the insurgent north that was so vicious that within three months fully 400,000 Somali civilians fled their homes for the uncertain refuge of the Ethiopian desert. Africa Watch estimates that at least 50,000 civilians died in the same period, thanks to thousands of executions, massive aerial bombardment of northern cities, and starvation and disease en route to squalid refugee camps.

Lavish U.S. support for Siad Barre during the cold war—we adopted him from the Soviets, who supported him during the 1970s—is directly responsible for the desperate situation in Somalia today. Moral clarity, indeed.

HOLLY BURKHALTER
*Washington Director,*
*Human Rights Watch*
*Washington, D.C.*

## Cropped

**To the editors:**

Was Jacob Weisberg serious in writing that crop insurance was too expensive for his brother-in-law's exotic fruit farm that was destroyed by Hurricane Andrew (Homestead Diarist, "Fruit Salad," October 5)? Compared with what—complete destruction of his farm? Hurricanes are not unknown in Florida, much like spring frost occasionally occurs in North Dakota. Weisberg's brother's pioneering operation is typical of many enterprises today—a willingness of entrepreneurs to share failure with the government but to take credit (and keep the profits) for themselves. This case is even more egregious in that crop insurance is subsidized by the government at more than 50 percent of its actual cost. But a free bailout is certainly better than one where you have to pay a premium. If citizens have the right to make claims against the government to support their desires to introduce white sapotes to the public, then who wouldn't have an equally valid claim against the U.S. Treasury? No wonder the deficit is so large.

JEFFREY ITELL
*Washington, D.C.*



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# Chubb and Moe Revisited: Ideology as Science

BY ALBERT SHANKER, PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

After decades of making speeches and writing articles, I've learned a few things. One of them is that the real tests for your arguments are not the people who are already with you or against you, but the ones who haven't made up their minds and those who might change their minds based on new evidence.

Judging from my travels and mail this past year, the idea of using public money to pay for the tuition of youngsters who choose (and are chosen by) private and religious schools has made some converts among this group of people who rely chiefly on evidence to make up their minds on important public policy issues. They don't have strong feelings one way or the other about ideological issues like our common school tradition or the separation of church and state. But they do care a lot about education and about preparing future citizens with the knowledge and skills America needs to compete in the global economy. They care about what works, and their bottom line is achievement. So, many of them tell me, often sadly, they must now support vouchers because the "evidence" shows that private schools outperform public schools, that market control of schools works better than democratic control.

**Chubb and Moe made technical decisions that tilted the results toward the policy conclusions they favored.**

The evidence, I ask? What about the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other studies I've presented? And I show them that when you compare public and private school students who have taken the same courses and/or whose parents have similar education and income levels, there is no difference in their achievement. Neither public nor private schools are producing the levels of achievement we need.

This is persuasive for some people. Even Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander—the President's top voucher salesman—doesn't refute these NAEP results. But another response I often get is a diplomatic version of "We can't really trust an analysis of this issue by the president of a teachers' union. There's self-interest involved." And then I ask, "Whose analysis moved you to support vouchers?" The answer I usually get is John Chubb and Terry Moe's *Politics, Markets and America's Schools.*

The curious fact is that almost no one who cites Chubb and Moe has read their book, although they have all read favorable things about it in newspaper editorials or op-ed pages. The few non-technical people who have read it confess they could not follow the statistical analysis that makes up more than half the book and that is supposed to support the conclusions. This problem is shared by the majority of people who have written about the book in the popular press and by all the pro-voucher politicians who cite it.

So why has this book been so influential? The answer I most often hear is that the book must be true because it's science and its authors objective academics.

Not so, argue Professors Valerie Lee (University of Michigan) and Anthony Bryk (University of Chicago). In "Science or Policy Argument? A Review of the Quantitative Evidence in Chubb and Moe's *Politics, Markets and America's Schools,*" a paper prepared for the Oct. 1, 1992, conference on school choice sponsored by the Economic Policy Institute in Wash., D.C., Lee and Bryk destroy Chubb and Moe's claim to have proven that private schools outperform public schools and that the reason is market control. They also demonstrate that Chubb and Moe made many technical decisions about how to conduct their analysis that tilted the results toward the policy conclusion they favored. "It is clear that Chubb and Moe have a personal preference for market control. It is not clear, however, that the empirical evidence favors the same argument."

Lee and Bryk are both sociologists and statisticians who are recognized by their peers as experts on the literature, data and methods Chubb and Moe used. They are also aware that "researchers' total objectivity is a myth" and are candid about their own perspective. "We have published a considerable volume of research on Catholic schools, most of which reflects positively on these schools." They also support "some aspects" of Chubb and Moe's work. But above all, Lee and Bryk are faithful to accepted procedures of scientific inquiry. And after using them on Chubb and Moe's research, they conclude "that the book falls considerably short of its stated aims. Having captured the public's attention, Chubb and Moe have artfully employed extensive, but not always solid, empirical evidence to support a policy argument to advance some preconceived notions about American schooling.... We contend that popular acceptance of this book as a source of scientific evidence to support its policy recommendations is unfortunate."

Lee and Bryk present important new evidence that tears apart the seemingly scientific foundation that made the Chubb and Moe book appear so credible. But equally important, they raise an important old worry about the role of science in a democratic society: Technical knowledge is essential to social improvement, but unless that knowledge is "broadly held, truly in the public domain," it might be used to promote anti-democratic and other harmful ends. As Lee and Bryk say, "Given the receptive ear for the message of *Politics, Markets and America's Schools* at the highest levels of our government, and the lack of scrutiny its empirical base has received from the media or the public, this worry seems well founded."

MR. SHANKER'S COMMENTS APPEAR IN THIS AD UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS. READER CORRESPONDENCE IS INVITED. ADDRESS YOUR LETTERS TO MR. SHANKER AT THE AFT, 555 NEW JERSEY AVE., N.W., WASHINGTON, DC 20001. ©1992 BY ALBERT SHANKER.

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THE NEW REPUBLIC

NOVEMBER 2, 1992

# THE CHARACTER THING

"The choice is yours. The American people should demand that their president tell the truth. Do you really believe—do you really believe—Bill Clinton will tell the truth? And do you, do you trust Bill Clinton to be your president?" Vice President Quayle's final parry in the debate last Tuesday night was a canned, last-resort attack on Bill Clinton's character. It was also hypocritical. President Bush has perfected the political art of dissembling, from matters of illegality (Iran-contra) to matters of simple political trust ("Read my lips. No new taxes."). His syntax has become an elaborate reflection of his vacuousness; on many, many issues of political trust, there is no traction in the man, no final grit beneath the layers and layers of political lubrication.

On the matter of Clinton's youthful trip to Moscow, the Bush-Quayle campaign revealed many of the reasons why its profound cynicism has come to sicken many Americans. It had all the patterns of a familiar three-step dance. Step one is using so-called surrogates to raise some obscure issue that impugns Clinton's loyalty to his country. Step two is to compare Clinton's convenient recollections of events long past with the inconvenient recollections of others and such contemporaneous evidence as can be found. Step three is for Bush and Quayle to seize on whatever discrepancies arise and say the issue isn't patriotism at all, but judgment, or character. Meanwhile, the same attackers who were deployed to promote the spurious issue in the first place—the Bob Dornans and Mary Matalins—say the issue *is* patriotism. The result, if the gimmick works, is a cloud over the nominee that lasts as long as it takes to sort the issues out.

It is no exaggeration to describe this tactic as McCarthyism. One of the hallmarks of McCarthyism was that it was less concerned with finding real Communists than it was in tarring Democrats and liberals with the label. Dornan, the Bush campaign's designated viper, said Clinton could not have traveled to Russia in the throes of the cold war without the KGB trying to recruit him as an "agent of influence." Bush knows as well as Dornan and everyone else that this assertion is unprovable and, even if true, would not imply any complicity on Clinton's part. Still, the president of the United States continued—and continues—to imply that there was more to the story and that Clinton should "level with the American people" about the trip. This was a bit of red-bait, desperately dangled in the hope of catching something, anything, else.

And yet. And yet. The more general attacks on Clinton's character are not beyond the bounds of fair, tough politics and will, we believe, be even more effective in the last three weeks of this campaign. The character issue may be the only thing that the Bush-Quayle campaign has left, but it is not to be taken lightly. Vice President Quayle honed in on the personal relationship between citizens and their president and exacerbated the worries many voters legitimately have about the character of Bill Clinton. For the many who voted Republican in the last three elections and who are now considering voting for Clinton-Gore on November 3, this is a central concern. These voters will decide this election, and their discomfort with Clinton's character should not be dismissed by longtime Democrats as some trumped-up issue invented by the Republican National Committee.

Clinton's treatment of the draft issue has, from the beginning, shown all the characteristics of a man who cares more about his short-term political survival than about providing the full, plain details of his past, whatever the political consequences. Indeed, in so many areas, Clinton's thoroughly political character makes him at times almost indistinguishable from his opponent. On many critical issues—from welfare to free trade to the deficit—he has waffled to avoid offense, a point Quayle effectively hammered home during the debate. The voters find this unnerving, which is why they could contemplate the bumbling authenticity of James Stockdale or the crazed reality of Ross Perot. Even Clinton's authentic side—his background, his family, his marriage—has been burnished by the production values of Hollywood and turned into a packaged series of Oprah-style sound bites (see "Southern Exposure," page 13).

A president has to be able to speak to Americans in moments of crisis—and indeed of calm—in a way that can be trusted. On matters concerning his past, Clinton has consistently taken the line of least resistance. On important matters of principle, Clinton has shown a profound tendency to tell every constituency what it wants to hear and to placate special interests—from trial lawyers to labor unions—at the expense of hard policy choices. These are legitimate issues of presidential character. To be sure, they are not ones in which President Bush has a strong record. But they are now all that stands between Bill Clinton and the White House. He should treat them with the seriousness they deserve. •



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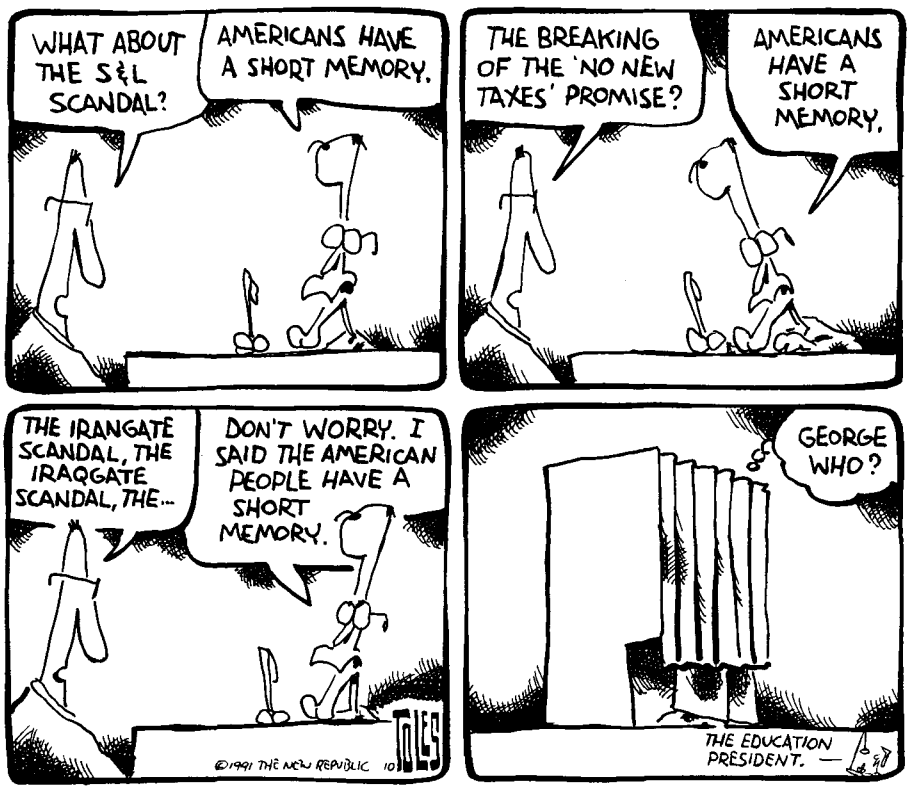
# NOTEBOOK

**B**USHISM OF THE WEEK: "But Governor Clinton—he talks about the reaction of the markets. There was a momentary fear that he might win, and that, the markets went phhhht, down like that. So, I don't think we can judge on—the stock market has been strong."
—October 11, in St. Louis

**C**LINTON SUCK-UP WATCH: "Of hundreds of campaign speeches, a talk by Governor Clinton in Milwaukee on October 1 is likely to be remembered longest. It was meant for Americans but will be studied intently in the rest of the world. If he is elected, the speech will be recalled constantly during his presidency to see if under pressure Mr. Clinton will be strong and faithful to the philosophy he put forward on that day. If he loses, or as president should give way under test, then at least the speech and its doctrine will be remembered as what Democratic leadership could have been."
—A. M. Rosenthal, in *The New York Times*, October 6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DON'T WORRY. I SAID THE AMERICAN PEOPLE HAVE A SHORT MEMORY.
GEORGE WHO?
THE EDUCATION PRESIDENT.
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TOLES

**A**ND THEY DIDN'T EVEN GO TO OXFORD: If the Gore-Quayle-Stockdale debate did nothing else, it vindicated the format recommended by the Commission on Presidential Debates. The debate was livelier and more substantive than any in recent memory. The tone was pleasantly chaotic; the candidates argued head-on, interrupted each other, asked questions, and dodged questions. Little time was wasted on preliminaries, and none was spent on preening by members of the press. Failures to delve deeper into issues couldn't be blamed on lack of time or stupid questions—only on the candidates themselves. It was, in short, a real debate, the first, we hope, of many to come.

**S**CANDAL: Do not be alarmed if the latest developments in the so-called Iraqgate controversy have you flummoxed. The scandal over the Reagan and Bush administrations' failed policy of appeasing Saddam Hussein now has become so convoluted that it's hard to follow the action even with a carefully marked scorecard. It now appears that the CIA lied to a federal judge about its knowledge of the scandal. But the CIA claims it was ordered to lie by the Justice Department. According to congressional officials, the CIA then lied in a press statement by claiming that the Justice Department had not ordered it to lie. The Justice Department denies that it ever told anyone to lie. Congressional investigators think *that* is probably a lie. As the charges and countercharges continue to fly, it's safe to assume that no one is telling the whole truth. When details of the Iraqgate scandal first began to accumulate earlier this year (see "The Odd Couple" by Mark Hosenball, TNR, June 1), conventional wisdom was that the Reagan-Bush policy of coddling Saddam may have been idiotic, but probably was not indictable. As the Bush administration ties itself in knots trying to explain who knew what when, suspicions of a criminal cover-up continue to mount.

**G**UFF FROM ABROAD: "As always when I visit this vital, creative country, I love to sit and hear them get excited about technicalities: the amazing new television transmission system just over the horizon, the hair-raising latest in biogenetics, why natural gas is going to zoom, how to float a Wall Street superbond, what happens when people stop eating beef. This eager, gifted people, with their extraordinary appetite for innovation, their zest for change, their courage, generosity, and boundless energy, are still the world's best bet to set the pattern of the twenty-first century. They are natural leaders. But who is to lead them?" —Paul Johnson, writing in *The Spectator* of London, September 26

**H**ANDOUTS ACROSS AMERICA: George Bush's recent multibillion-dollar federal giveaways on the campaign trail remind us that some of the same people were



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involved in a similar operation on behalf of Richard Nixon in 1972. Our office recently received a copy of a secret memo to H. R. Haldeman from Fred Malek, now Bush's campaign manger, then head of the so-called "responsiveness program" for the Committee to Re-elect the President. The thirteen-page memo, dated September 18, 1972, outlines plans for federal agencies—including the Small Business Administration and the Department of Housing and Urban Development—to spend tens of millions of dollars in key states to influence the outcome of the election. Targeted groups include Hispanics, the elderly, and, ironically, victims of a recent hurricane in Pennsylvania. In the memo Malek urged that "all copies of previous reports should be destroyed." The damage done by a leak, he wrote, would be "catastrophic." Somehow, a copy survived. This time around, it seems, they're not taking any chances.

DUDE: Douglas Coupland, who wrote "The Irony Board" on page 12, is author of *Shampoo Planet* (Pocket Books). •

## COURT WATCH

# BLOOD RITUAL

*By Jeff Rosen*

On November 4 the Supreme Court will hear arguments about whether ritual slaughter is a constitutional right. The city of Hialeah, Florida, banned animal sacrifices after widespread complaints that a local church was encouraging a "regress into paganism." The church, Lukumi Bablu Aye, Inc., practices an ancient Afro-Caribbean faith called Santeria, which has more than 50,000 adherents in southern Florida. (Most of them are Cuban exiles whose rituals were driven underground by Castro.) Santeria celebrates birth, marriage, and death rites by decapitating goats, chickens, doves, and turtles—often twenty at a time. The animals' blood is then drained into clay pots and many of the animals are eaten. According to *The Santeria Experience* by M. Gonzalez-Wippler, some are buried in the earth, along with "the blood of three roosters ... toasted corn, bananas, candies, and a generous shot of rum." The Court has been flooded with gory briefs from animal rights organizations, including United Poultry Concerns, which declares that killing chickens for any reason "humiliates their dignity, and encourages human smugness toward the rest of life."

The protests notwithstanding, the Court should vote for the church; and there is a good chance it will. But the justices are likely to be closely divided about the legal basis for the right to sacrifice. The church's lawyer, Douglas Laycock of the University of Texas, will argue that the ban is unconstitutional under the Court's last major decision about the free exercise of religion, a 1990 case called *Employment Division* v. *Smith*. But *Smith* was a serious compromise of the First Amendment; and if the Court reaffirms it, other religious minorities will win a Pyrrhic victory that Congress may be forced to correct.

For at least thirty years before *Smith*, the Supreme Court had a robust test for protecting religious liberty: no law could burden the exercise of sincere religious belief unless it was "the least restrictive means of achieving a compelling governmental interest." In balancing the claims of religious minorities against the interests of the state, in the '60s and early '70s the Court created a series of special exemptions for religious minorities (such as allowing the Amish to keep their children home from public school). During the Burger and Rehnquist years, the compelling interest test became a doctrinal facade, as the Court sided with the state and against religious minorities at almost every turn.

In *Smith* the Court abandoned the test, except for the most blatant cases of religious discrimination. In a 5-4 decision, Justice Antonin Scalia held that there was no need to prove a compelling state interest "if prohibiting the exercise of religion ... is not the object of [a law] but merely its incidental effect." Oregon, in other words, was free to force Native Americans to obey its general laws against drug use, even though the laws had the "incidental effect" of outlawing the ritual use of peyote. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor objected that Scalia's reasoning would remove First Amendment protection for most religious minorities, since few states would be naive enough to pass laws for the specific purpose of banning religious rituals.

Hialeah's ban on animal sacrifice "in a public or private ritual or ceremony not for the primary purpose of food consumption" seems to be one of those rare cases. Unlike Oregon's ban on drug use, the Hialeah law is not a "neutral law of general applicability." An animal can be killed for any reason in Hialeah, except for religious or ceremonial ones. You can boil lobsters alive; feed live rats to pet snakes; kill for food or for sport; slaughter unwanted pets in your front yard—as long as you do not perform a ritual while doing so. (As one of the amicus briefs solemnly puts it, "One can get Chicken McNuggets in Hialeah, but one may not partake of chicken roasted at a religious service of the Santeria faith.")

It is also obvious that neither of the interests that Hialeah asserts—preventing cruelty to animals and risks to public health—is compelling enough to sustain a law that explicitly forbids religious worship. The lower court was persuaded by Dr. Michael Fox of the Humane Society, who testified that the Santeria



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method of slaughter—jabbing a knife through the animal's throat—may cause "from seconds to minutes" more pain than the Jewish and Muslim method of cutting cleanly through the carotid arteries in the neck. But sparing a chicken seconds of pain has hardly been considered a compelling state interest in the past: it is a constitutional right in Florida to use hunting weapons that inflict lingering, festering wounds; and the Federal Humane Slaughter Act exempts all religious rituals. As for the entirely speculative public health concerns, they could be satisfied with laws regulating the disposal of animal carcasses.

Although blatant examples of religious discrimination are unconstitutional under *Smith*, less overt regulations on religion are becoming routine. For that reason, an unlikely coalition—including the Seventh-day Adventists, B'nai B'rith, and People for the American Way—is urging the Court to overturn *Smith* in the animal sacrifice case and to resurrect the compelling interest test across the board. As a result of lower court decisions applying *Smith*, autopsies have been performed on the bodies of Orthodox Jews and Vietnamese Hmong over their families' religious objections; and churches have been zoned out of several cities on the grounds that their rights are no different from those of pornographic movie theaters. Unless *Smith* is overturned, the coalition argues, Catholic school children could be forced to attend sex education classes in public schools; churches could be forced to hire homosexuals over their religious objections; and Jehovah's Witnesses could lose their exemptions from jury service.

David Souter and Clarence Thomas said they disagreed with *Smith* in their confirmation hearings; but unless Justice Anthony Kennedy continues his recent habit of switching his votes, Scalia will probably keep his majority. Instead of waiting to find out, civil libertarians in Congress intend to reintroduce the Religious Freedom Restoration Act at the beginning of the next session. Co-sponsored by Stephen Solarz and Orrin Hatch, RFRA declares simply that "government shall not burden a person's exercise of religion" unless the burden "is the least restrictive means of furthering [a] compelling governmental interest."

Although RFRA has broad bipartisan support, it has been successfully opposed over the past two years by the United States Catholic Conference, which fears that Jewish women could invoke it to challenge state bans on abortion if *Roe* v. *Wade* is overturned. (According to Talmudic law, abortion is not a choice but a religious duty when the life of the mother is threatened.) The fears are exaggerated: no state has enacted a ban on abortion without exceptions for the life of the mother; and no Court that overturned *Roe* would be likely to deny that the state has a compelling interest in protecting unborn life.

Other opponents of RFRA are concerned that Congress may not have the constitutional authority to overrule the Supreme Court. But Congress's explicit power to "enforce" the Fourteenth Amendment probably includes the power to enforce the other provisions of the Bill of Rights. And Congress has often relied on the Fourteenth Amendment to protect civil rights and voting rights that the Supreme Court has refused to protect. By the same token, what made *Smith* so controversial was Scalia's claim that legislatures are more competent than judges to create special exemptions for religious minorities. If Congress takes him at his word and passes RFRA, Scalia would be hard-pressed to strike it down.

The likely victory of the church of the Lukumi could create a false sense of security for other religious minorities, which will be left unprotected by *Smith*. But Michael McConnell of the University of Chicago fears that "the facts are so unpleasant that the Court could lurch further in the direction of minimizing free exercise rights." Supporters of RFRA shouldn't wait to discover how squeamish the Court will be. •

**MEDELLÍN POSTCARD**

# MESSRS. CLEAN

*By Susan Benesch*

Fifteen-year-old Francine giggles, flips her hair out of her eyes, and explains that killing can be good. As a recruit of the Revolutionary Militia Commandos, she is taking lessons in what they call "social cleaning." Her group is one of at least five self-described Popular Militias, bands of young vigilantes in Medellín and Colombia's other large cities who have decided that "eliminating" drug dealers and thieves is the only way to rid the streets of violent crime.

Though the once all-powerful Medellín cartel is now weakening under competition from the newer Cali cartel, and its chief, Pablo Escobar, is in hiding after escaping from prison in July, violence in the city has decreased only a little. Thousands of young hitmen who were left unemployed formed gangs and began to attack their neighbors in the city's hillside slums. In Colombia, a country of 32 million people, more than 25,000 were killed last year, making it more violent than almost any country in the world. In Medellín alone, a city of about 2 million, 7,081 people were killed. Among the killers were soldiers, police officers, drug traffickers, leftist guerrillas, assassins for hire, kidnappers, and paramilitary squads. About three years ago the popular militias added themselves to the mix. Now the militias claim 4,000 to 5,000 mostly teenage members, a number confirmed by the DAS, Colombia's investigative police.

Francine and her fellow militia members believe



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killing drug dealers and other criminals is a community service. She won't use the word "kill" to describe what she does. "It's a word that sounds so ugly," she says. Instead, people are "put to bed," "knocked down," "heated," "cracked," "put on the floor," or "teased."

Many citizens are grateful for the militia's services. "We are very pleased that they are here 'cleaning up,' as they say," says Isabel, a 71-year-old woman in the treeless Medellín neighborhood of El Bosque (The Forest). "They aren't stealing. They are killing, but they're cleaning up." With a broad smile she adds, "We are already pretty clean around here." Of course, many Colombians consider the militias no better than the street gangs they have displaced. And in the poor neighborhoods they now control, people hesitate to criticize them.

But a year ago gang and drug violence was so prevalent in El Bosque that people feared even to go outside. Police stayed away too, although El Bosque residents say officers sometimes collected bribes from drug dealers. "The state was not in power here," says a forty-ish Aburra Valley militia leader who uses the alias "Lucho." "The power was the gangs. Confronted with a reality like that, what do you do? There is nothing else, where are you going to go? You have to use the legitimate right of defense." "Ricardo," another militia commander, adds, "You have to use weapons to get rid of weapons." Even a Medellín social worker who is bitterly opposed to violence says that he cannot decide whether he is really against the militias. "It would have been impossible even to go there before," he says of Medellín barrios like El Bosque.

Militia members claim killing is not their main method of social cleaning. "We start with dialogue," Francine explains. "We warn them. Then, if they don't stop, we take more drastic measures. They can leave the barrio or fix themselves up. Then if they don't ... they are eliminated." Certain militias "think that the thing is to flatten everybody," Lucho admits, but he insists that his group is different. "We are not so militarized." Lucho proudly describes the youth groups, soccer games, and fiestas his militia sponsors.

On a recent Sunday the Aburra Valley militia hosted a fiesta in El Bosque. They roasted a goat and a pig, played soccer in the unpaved street, and spun wads of cotton candy on a borrowed machine. Just after twi-

## THE IRONY BOARD

***A Survey of Words That Can Only Be Used 100% Ironically.***

*Helpful Criteria*

Might Sammy have used this word to greet Dean Martin on a stage?
Might this word have been used by *TV Guide* to describe Marlo Thomas at some point during the run of "That Girl"?
Might I hear this word barked at a stranger from a Rancho Mirage golf cart?
Might I read this word on the box liner of a VHS cassette titled *Teenage Panty Party*?
Might Kraft use this word to describe one of their many fine dairy-related products?
Could anyone under 35 say this word with a straight face?

*The List*

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | babe | bachelor | | |
| bohemian | booze | cabaret | cheesy | cocktail | co-ed |
| coiffure | cosmic | country club | crusty | cultural elite | daddy-o |
| daffy | dame | dreamy | energy | entertainer | excellent |
| extra chunky | fabulous | family values | flavor crystals | food chain | Frank |
| Frisco | groovy | highball | hip | homemaker | honey |
| hot | hubby | humanitarian | hunk | instant | kicky |
| kooky | little women | -Lite | madcap | Madison Avenue | mentholated |
| modern | *moi* | new | nugget | nutty | o' |
| perky | prom | pulsating | queer | ritzy | real |
| runner-up | sexy | show tunes | splitsville | spouse | swanky |
| swinging | swingingest | tasty | the wife | thrusting | treat |
| | | Vegas | vixen | | |

*Bonus words: Words perilously close to becoming 100% ironic:*

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| fax | fresh | get | lunch | pain | share |
| | | them | they | | |

DOUGLAS COUPLAND



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light, while El Bosque couples danced to scratchy cassettes, two young militia men nicknamed Fredy and Mocho slipped an Ingram submachine gun into a ratty green knapsack and strolled off to "crack" someone. The target, a young man nicknamed Cagaleto, was accused of sticking up beer and milk trucks. He survived the evening: he was not home.

Few of the militia members attend school. In El Bosque, a neighborhood formed by squatters who took over part of Medellín's botanical gardens, there are no schools. Instead, the militias—several of which were started by former leftist guerrillas of the National Liberation Army (ELN) or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)—teach "ideology."

Troops in the Aburra Valley militia hold one of three ranks. First rank is for new recruits, second rank trains intensively, and third-rankers each have a personal weapon. Lucho holds up a large poster board with a week's instruction calendar scrawled on it. Monday: 8 to 10 a.m., physical training; 11 to 12:30, "solution of cases." Saturday morning, 9 and 38 millimeter weapons training. Saturday afternoon is free for going to the movies. In Francine's ideological training group, she was taught not to dread killing. When she started training two months ago she didn't want to kill. Now she says she wouldn't mind. "At the beginning you feel bad, because [the victim] is also a human being, who has family," she says. "But there are people who just don't ... get it. Some people just don't understand dialogue."

Lucho boasts that he has been forming militias in other cities. Recently he spent a month in Bogotá, the capital, and in Cali, Colombia's third-largest city after Medellín and Bogotá. The militias finance themselves by collecting "donations" from local merchants, and with small businesses of their own that they would not discuss in detail. Two commanders from different militias say they hope to amass political power with their movement, either by staging insurrections in the barrios they control or by secretly backing candidates on the Medellín city council. They say it makes more sense to organize in the cities, where most of Colombia's population is concentrated, than in the countryside, as Colombia's guerrillas have mostly done in the past.

As Lucho walks down the main street of El Bosque, a woman approaches him. "I am the mother of the one they're going to give it to," she says, barely able to control herself. "Please no. You already did my other son. He was bad, but this one is not!"

"El Negro Caicedo," Lucho says. "He was very bad." The mother keeps pleading until he grudgingly agrees to reinvestigate John Jairo Caicedo, the surviving son. Lucho rolls his eyes. "After you kill them," he says, "then they were all saints who worked hard at their jobs."

SUSAN BENESCH is Latin America correspondent for the *St. Petersburg Times.*

**Clinton as sitcom.**

# SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

*By Jacob Weisberg*

"The Man from Hope," the thirteen-minute documentary on Bill Clinton's Arkansas roots that won the heart of the Democratic Convention, incorporates black-and-white snapshots from his mother's family album. The faded photographs dissolve into the full-color candidate, who describes a town "where it seemed like everybody knew everybody else" and waxes sentimental about the influence of his grandfather, an early believer in integration who ran the town grocery store. The Clintons are pictured as an all-American family: they eat breakfast together in a homey kitchen; Bill pitches a softball to his daughter, Chelsea, and talks about his inner sadness because of the father he never knew. As a piano and strings crescendo, Clinton recalls "a place and time when nobody locked their doors at night, everybody showed up for a parade on main street, and kids like me could dream of being a part of something bigger than themselves." The film ends on his words: "I still believe in a place called Hope."

"Evening Shade," a sitcom about a small town in Arkansas, opens with sepia-toned, family-album pictures of the characters as children. As the black-and-white past dissolves into a color present, the narrator, a black café owner, relates how this or that story occurred in a place called Evening Shade, a town where everybody knows everybody else, where folks sit out on their porches on summer evenings and don't need to lock their doors at night. In the season premiere, Burt Reynolds, who plays Wood Newton, coach of the losing local high school football team, laments the razing of his father's store. Though he never really "knew" his father, we learn that he was a good man who treated blacks as equals long before the end of segregation. Newton is the head of a modern but God-fearing and traditional household. Though his wife is an ambitious prosecuting attorney, they all eat together in the wallpapered kitchen and play catch in the yard.

It's not surprising that these two evocations of the small-town, American South have a lot in common. Both are the creation of Mozark Productions, the Hollywood workshop of Harry Thomason and Linda Bloodworth-Thomason, two Arkansas-bred producers who also happen to be close friends of Bill and Hillary Clinton's. For the better part of a decade, the Clintons and Thomasons have had a symbiotic alliance. Hillary Clinton came up with the name "Evening Shade," which is a real hamlet in



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northern Arkansas. When the Thomasons got into a messy public feud with Delta Burke, former star of their program "Designing Women," Bill Clinton lobbied CBS, the Thomasons' network, on their behalf. For their part, the Thomasons give advice to the candidate and keep Bill's troubled brother, Roger, employed and out of trouble. Linda even wanted to take the cast of "Evening Shade" to campaign for Clinton in New Hampshire last February (the idea was scuttled because Burt Reynolds doesn't like to fly).

But the Thomasons' greatest contribution has been helping to devise a mythic backdrop for Clinton. Though their work for the campaign is unpaid and unofficial, they have created a set of images and cultural symbols that, like Ronald Reagan's "Morning in America" ad, has struck a resonant chord with the voting public. Thus the Thomasons have become something of an anomaly: two card-carrying members of Hollywood's cultural elite who are leading liberals to victory in the culture war by showing that it's they, not the Republicans, who are the real Rockwellians, the ones truly rooted to American "values." Indeed, if George Bush's attempts to portray his opponent as an elitist, social engineering crypto-Communist are failing this time around, it may be not so much because Clinton is any less fixated on Swedish social policy than Michael Dukakis, but because the Thomasons have cloaked him in the raiment of Hope and Evening Shade.

HILLARY AND LINDA

Though they earn an estimated $300,000 a week on three top-20 prime-time shows, the Thomasons stress that Arkansas—not Hollywood—is their inspiration. Linda says she stays in touch with reality by going to a beauty parlor in Little Rock, where they keep a condo. Reality, however, is something that keeps its distance in the Thomasons' South. "Designing Women" and "Evening Shade," for which Linda writes most of the scripts herself and which Harry directs, portray an idealized village life, where easy-going integration prevails. In "Designing Women," the four women who run an interior decorating firm are all close friends with a black man who works for them. In the town of "Evening Shade," blacks and whites mingle without a trace of race-consciousness. Even homosexuals blend effortlessly into the communitarian mosaic.

In the Thomasons' New South, characters are prone to address the latest concerns of Washington liberals. Two weeks after the Senate voted to confirm Clarence Thomas, Linda produced a special edition of "Designing Women" in reply. The climax is an indignant speech in which the character Julia Sugarbaker asks men, "Who in the hell do you think you are?"—and is answered by vehement canned applause. "The Strange Case of Clarence and Anita" was so important, Linda thought, that she took out a full-page ad in *The Washington Post* to publicize the rerun in June: "If You Missed It the First Time, Don't Miss It Tonight." Linda complains about not winning an Emmy for anything but hairdressing, as if it were a rebuke to the message of her shows. "We have influenced how men think about women and how women think of themselves," she told *Vogue*. Of course, this sort of evangelizing doesn't imply a vow of poverty. At a panel at the Writers' Guild earlier this year, Linda boasted not only about molding public consciousness, but about making a vast amount of money at the same time.

In their work on the campaign, however, the Thomasons have focused on appearance rather than ideology. It was Linda who saw early on, according to campaign sources, that Hillary had an image problem. In June she deployed hair, makeup, and clothes stylists from her production company to recast the aspiring First Lady in a blonder, cuddlier image. The Thomasons have also worked hard to make Hillary and Bill into a couple that the American middle class can recognize. Since they arranged for Bill Clinton to appear on "The Tonight Show" in 1988 to repair the damage done by his windy nominating speech at the Democratic Convention, they have urged him and Hillary to redirect politics through the pop culture. Not only did they coach the Clintons for their joint appearance on "60 Minutes" during the Gennifer Flowers escapade, they take credit for instigating Clinton's saxophone playing on "Arsenio Hall," his appearances on "Donahue," "Larry King Live," and MTV, and the couple's visit to the Nashville Network on cable in August. Media consultant Mandy Grunwald, with whom Linda is feuding, has also taken credit for many of these appearances. But it is clear that, at the very least, the Thomasons overcame the objections of others in the campaign that such venues weren't "presidential" enough. "This is the way to get your message to the people," says Harry. "If you're concentrating on hard news shows, you're not going to get the message out there."

At the New York convention, Linda devised Clinton's entrance the night before his acceptance speech,



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remembering it as something that John F. Kennedy had done in 1960. Harry surmounted logistical and security worries to allow the Clintons to walk to Madison Square Garden. When the Clintons arrived at the hall, it was a line of Linda's that Bill delivered: he said he was going to prove himself the "Comeback Kid." Harry also gets credit for insisting on confetti. And "Designing Women" designers prettified the stage and chose Clinton's acceptance suit. But the greatest coup was "The Man from Hope," Linda's Triumph of the Bill.

Clinton's media consultants, Grunwald and Frank Greer, wanted the film to meld Clinton's personal story with his political one, but Linda, who fought Grunwald's interference, managed to make a pure human-interest drama. Grunwald won another battle, by keeping the Vietnam issue, which the Thomasons wanted to include, out of the film. Both Grunwald and Bloodworth-Thomason have claimed credit for finding a bit of archival footage universally acclaimed as a high point: an ecstatic, 16-year-old Clinton shaking hands with JFK in the White House Rose Garden. Grunwald says her office found it in the Kennedy Library; Bloodworth-Thomason counters that she was the one who thought to look, and compares Grunwald's role to picking up film at Fotomat. "If I had been worried about where credit was going to be appropriated, I would have come out and taken a bow," she says.

The Thomasons don't consider themselves political consultants. "We're friends who happen to have some knowledge," Linda says. But they also have considerable political-cultural power in their own right. Along with Diane English, the Thomasons have enough pull with CBS to meld its Monday night line-up into an extended ad for Clinton. The Thomasons' newest show, "Hearts Afire," is mostly a laugh-track sitcom that presents Capitol Hill as a non-stop riot of sex, boozing, and boogying-down. But the premise—a bombshell liberal journalist goes to work as press secretary for a buffoonish right-wing senator—gives Bloodworth-Thomason a chance to sound off with Clinton sound bites like these: "We have had enough of trickle-down economics. I think it's time for a little trickle-down humanity"; and "We've had enough discussion about family values. It's time to pass some legislation that values families." ("I think the president owes it to family values to show that he values American families," Clinton said in the first debate.) Roger Clinton even sang the program's theme, "Soul Survivor," on the second episode.

Their proximity to the Clintons has led some to speculate that the Thomasons will become an obnoxious presence in Washington if their candidate wins. Don't bet on it. With a $50 million contract with CBS—the largest in the network's history—they're making far too much money to quit T.V. now. In any case, they have plenty of clout where they are. "Politics and entertainment have always been the same business," Linda has said. This used to be a Republican attitude; it's now a bipartisan sentiment. Thanks mostly to the Thomasons, 1992 may be remembered as the year the mass media finally usurped the political process, the year the sitcom merged with the campaign. Expect an infotainment presidency. •

**The perils of Bosnian intervention.**

# LET THEM SINK

*By Ronald Steel*

The smell of interventionism is once again in the air. This time not from rightists agitated about the insidious spread of communism, but from liberals distressed by the nasty consequences of nationalism. They are pained by what is taking place in Bosnia and consider it an American responsibility somehow to set things right. Oddly, many who are eager for the United States to plunge into the morass of the Yugoslav civil war are those who wanted to stand aside in Kuwait and get out of Vietnam.

This is different, they argue. Terrible things are happening to innocent people. But terrible things are always happening to innocent people everywhere in the world. The human species thrives on violence and expresses it politically through tribal groups. Never is it fully under control, and we accept this as a fact of life. Indeed, we are barely able to control it in our own cities, which are coming increasingly to resemble the nightmare world of *A Clockwork Orange.*

At the moment tribal wars can be observed not only in Bosnia, but also in Somalia, Liberia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan, and tomorrow no doubt in half a dozen other places as well. But the Bosnian mess, unlike the others, is in Europe, which is white and mostly Christian, and thus, well, more like us, it is argued. We just can't stand by and watch people being besieged and even murdered because of their ethnicity. To this there are several answers. The first is, yes we can, because we do it all the time. Second, although detention camps and "ethnic cleansing" are appalling, this reportedly takes place in Croatian-controlled areas as well. Worse things have happened, with the approval of U.S. officials, in anti-Communist massacres by the governments of El Salvador and Nicaragua. It is bad enough that Muslims are being forced from their home, for territorial readjustment. But it is not the same as genocide. This is a fight over turf.

Nor is Serbia an international menace. It has no design to dominate Europe or to conquer the world. A nation, Yugoslavia, has collapsed, and ethnic groups within that area are trying to set up states of their own. That they might want to do so is understandable. That they have the right to do so is problematic. That they should demand that the international community honor and defend their ethnic creations is patently absurd.

This is particularly true given the circumstances attendant upon the breakup of Yugoslavia. When central con-



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trol in Belgrade weakened, the authorities in Croatia—who have long resisted Serbian control—seized the opportunity to declare independence. Initially this was greeted with alarm by Washington and most European capitals because it threatened precisely the kind of situation that exists now.

The Germans, however, had other ideas. They have long held special feelings toward Croatia. During the Third Reich, breakaway Croatians set up a Nazi puppet state under Hitler's protection. The Croatian "Ustasha" regime was held responsible for murdering 700,000 Serbs, Jews, and Gypsies during World War II. Resistance to the Nazis was almost entirely by the Serbs, who bravely fought against the German occupation of their country and against Hitler's allies in Croatia. Today's Germans still prefer a small Croatia dependent economically and politically on German power to a large Yugoslavia. They insisted on granting diplomatic recognition to an independent Croatia and dragooned the rest of the E.C.—dependent on the goodwill of the Bundesbank—into following suit. The United States eventually tagged along.

The result was predictable. The ruling group in Bosnia and Herzegovina feared that the territory would be divided between Serbia and Croatia more or less along ethnic lines. To prevent this they hastily declared Bosnia to be an independent state along borders that had been defined when it was merely a part of Yugoslavia. Serbia's war to control parts of that state then began, with Croats in Bosnia probing means to link their areas to Croatia.

The Serbs may be right or wrong in this objective, depending on whom you talk to. But what is going on in the former Yugoslavia is not international aggression. Rather it is a civil war along ethnic lines. We have seen many of these in the past and foolishly intervened in several of them, such as Lebanon and Vietnam. We will undoubtedly see many more in the future. In sanctioning the breakup of Yugoslavia, the United States and the E.C. have undermined the principle that international frontiers in Europe, however inconvenient, cannot be changed by force. This means that other frontiers drawn up at the Treaty of Versailles to create new nations from the old Austro-Hungarian empire are no longer sacred. Ukrainians, Hungarians, Romanians, Slovaks, Poles, Russians, Greeks, and Albanians all have territorial claims.

We now, unfortunately, have every reason to expect a resumption of that staple of nineteenth-century Europe: the Balkan wars. The new interventionists argue that we must nip such potential aggression in the bud, that if we act against Serbia other disturbers of the peace will crawl back into their lairs. We have heard this before. It is a variant of the domino theory. But the collapse of communism and the unleashing of ancient nationalistic enmities in Eastern Europe will not be contained by whatever happens in Bosnia.

And precisely how will we end the troubles in Bosnia? Some imagine that sending relief supplies by air or even by opening a land corridor will be enough. *The New York Times*, more agitated about Bosnia than it was about Kuwait, suggests that we "send commandos to shut down the concentration camps and provide safe haven for refugees." While the *Times* states that the choice is not one of sending hundreds of thousands of troops or staying out, it urges "limited military intervention on a collective basis" and promises that this will "warn dictators everywhere that aggression cannot proceed without retribution."

Even supposing it were possible to get other nations to go along with such a military intervention, which is unlikely, how would this prevent the Serbs from continuing guerrilla warfare in defense of what they believe is rightfully theirs, and how long would foreign armies be willing to stay there? The Germans never subdued the largely Serbian resistance forces under Tito and continued fighting in Yugoslavia until their defeat in 1945. And if the Serbs did desist, the Croats would rush in to take their share, and the Muslims to exact retribution. This is the history of the Balkans.

We are told that the fighting in Bosnia is a threat to the peace of Europe, and could spread throughout the continent and perhaps beyond. If the Bosnian mess is such a problem for European stability, why don't the Europeans do something about it? The E.C. seems far more concerned about exchange rates than it does about refugees. Even the Germans have now apparently lost interest. In fact, they have their own refugee problem at home, which is being greatly exacerbated by the civil war in Yugoslavia. The Germans have already taken in some 400,000 refugees this year, most of them fleeing the "new democracies" of Eastern Europe. Yet even they prefer to cope with the refugees than sink into the morass of Balkan civil wars. The Europeans apparently feel that Yugoslavia is a Pandora's box that, once having foolishly been opened, should now be kept at arm's length.

Rather than dissuading future aggressors, intervention on behalf of the Bosnians could encourage other irredentionist minorities to carve out their own states and appeal for international help—or in this case American help, since it would appear that only in the United States is there any appetite for intervention in Europe's tribal wars.

The Europeans, quite wisely, did not intervene in our civil war, when one geographically, socially, and economically distinct part of the nation tried to secede from the rest. They waited until we resolved the conflict, recognizing that only we ourselves could. But then, Europeans are not Wilsonians, determined to spread the blessings of democracy and self-determination throughout the world. They remain skeptical about actions designed, in the *Times*'s words, to "warn dictators everywhere that aggression cannot proceed without retribution." They have heard that line before. One would think that we had, too, during our numerous far-flung cold war interventions. But the yearning to set the world right remains a powerful one, even when it involves unknown costs in an open-ended conflict. Now, ironically, it is championed by many of those who once lectured so earnestly on the perils of globalism. •



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**George Bush's final gambit.**

# I, BAKER

*By Sidney Blumenthal*

As the first presidential debate finished, James Baker materialized on television. Ever since leaving the State Department to become chief of staff, he had cloistered himself in the West Wing. "I haven't laid eyes on the guy. I know people at the White House who say they never see him," said a high Bush-Quayle campaign official. But now the spectral Baker appeared chatting with anchorman after anchorman. For the president had just announced the linchpin of his campaign program: "What I'm going to do is say to Jim Baker when this campaign is over, 'All right, let's sit down now. You do in domestic affairs what you've done in foreign affairs.'" Within the week, Baker proclaimed, he would deliver a speech about his intentions as the economic "czar" of Bush's second term.

But even then Baker was finding a way to protect himself. If Bush lost, he might be held culpable—"maybe a lot," Baker conceded, getting out in front of the press spin. "The White House chief of staff," he pointed out, "is not the campaign chairman." Thus the relationship that has framed the last four years continued its tortuous path. The conventional view of these last weeks as testimony to the faithful friendship between Bush and Baker is a fantasy. Their friendship has become another shape that power has assumed for them. In their final gambit for power—the shadow presidency of Baker—they remain true to the ruthlessness and mutual suspicion that has curdled their relationship nearly from the start, and that is finally poisoning them.

"Every morning," said a Republican political consultant who has worked with Baker on four presidential campaigns, "Jim Baker looks in the mirror and says, 'You're better looking than George Bush. You're smarter. Why aren't you president?' I am convinced that happens. But he has no illusions." Before Lee Atwater died of a brain tumor, according to a source who was close to him, Baker confided "that all the speculation about being named vice president won't work." Instead, it was inevitable that Bush would force him back into a role he despises: the handler. Bush's desperate need for him as the rescuer fills Baker with rage. In 1988, upset at becoming Bush's campaign manager, Baker complained to Martin Nolan of the *Boston Globe*: "Do you think I enjoyed leaving the office of secretary of treasury, being fifth in line to the presidency, to come over here to be called a handler?" Shortly afterward, when he saw his picture on the cover of *Time*, under the headline "The Year of the Handlers," he told his aides he felt like retching.

George Bush, for his part, considers the political help as belonging to a glorified servant class. They sweat so that he can perform his higher calling. Only Baker is exempt from his condescension because he is his social peer. "Nobody got the deference from Bush that Baker got—nobody," said Edward Rogers, who was Atwater's and John Sununu's deputy. For all this, they are often spiteful about each other. Baker prefers not to travel with the president, because, as he once told *The New York Times*, he is then compelled to play "the goddamn butler." And Bush wonders in private why Jimmy's press notices are so glowing, while he has such difficulty winning praise. He could not have been wholeheartedly grateful in 1988 when he had to use Jimmy to negotiate with *Newsweek* to stop calling him "a wimp." More than anyone else, Baker is intimate with Bush's flaws. That is why he is the one best able to cover them up.

"Work hard, study, and keep out of politics." This was the admonition of Baker's grandfather to the young lawyers in his Houston firm, Baker & Botts, the second oldest west of the Mississippi. James Baker is the latest in a long line of James Bakers—down to his great-grandfather, the founder of the firm. The Bakers, who have cultivated starchy patrician values, are the aristocracy in Houston. After the Civil War, Baker & Botts handled the railroads, banks, and trusts in Texas for the likes of Jay Gould and E. H. Harriman. The Baker boys themselves were sent East to matriculate before returning to assume their duties. Discipline, above all, was the family virtue. If Jimmy didn't get out of bed promptly, his stern father, whom he called "The Warden," doused him with cold water. Baker strove to meet his exacting demands through acts of stoicism. At Princeton, even though he was married and had a child, Baker pledged his father's fraternity and wore a stinking fish on a string for a week to prove himself to the old man.

James Baker and George Bush first became partners on the tennis courts of the Bayou Club, winning the club doubles championship. Baker, a nominal Tory Democrat, was drawn gradually into politics by the Connecticut transplant, who had deep ties to the GOP in the East. When Bush ran for the Senate in 1970, Baker was



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recruited to organize Houston; and in 1972 Bush turned Baker into a local fund-raiser for Richard Nixon. Baker was restless. His young wife had died of cancer, and he was bored with legal practice. Through Bush's intervention, he got appointed undersecretary of commerce by President Ford.

Once in Washington, Baker rose swiftly. Bush wanted to run as Ford's vice presidential nominee, a post he had sought ever since Thomas Dewey, his father's friend, had proposed him for it to Nixon in 1968. But he had promised the Senate during his confirmation hearings as CIA director that he would stay out of politics. Ford, meanwhile, was stumbling down the polls. It appeared the sitting president might be overrun by Ronald Reagan, and Baker was tapped by a faltering campaign to be Ford's delegate hunter. Baker hired a team of professionals, who began tracking every one, getting the president to make phone calls and disburse federal largess. Many observers attribute Ford's nomination to Baker's precision. Afterward Baker called the work "demeaning."

Baker's boss at Commerce, Rogers Morton, was also the campaign chairman. But his health was failing, he drank too much, and he was making gaffes, even saying his job consisted of "rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic." The political directorate—pollster Robert Teeter, chief of staff Dick Cheney, and the California consultant Stu Spencer—chose the assiduous delegate hunter for the job. Almost all the casting of Ford's political character in the campaign had been done. Baker coordinated the control of the candidate. When Ford came from behind only to lose narrowly, Baker received much of the credit. He set his sights immediately on the job of chairman of the Republican National Committee, which Bush had held. Baker managed to convince both right-wing and moderate factions that he would somehow represent them; but when it was revealed that he had run up a surplus in the Ford campaign treasury, he was shunted aside.

Bush was already planning his presidential campaign for 1980, but Baker would not sign on. He "didn't take Bush seriously," said a Republican politico. More, Baker had been at the center of a presidential campaign and, according to a number of sources, had designs of his own on the White House. So he returned to Texas to run for office. He decided to run for attorney general rather than governor, because he thought he would have an easier race against the likely liberal Democrat, who, unfortunately for Baker, was defeated in the primary. Baker never really had a chance. But he had one regret in that campaign. An aide dug up a criminal case of a vile murderer named Kleason, whom his opponent, Mark White, as secretary of state, had declined to extradite. "Baker was scared of it because it was so bad," said the aide. "It seemed like we were making it up. It became a joke later. Baker would say, 'It's time to go with Kleason.'" Baker would not make the same mistake again. Negative campaigning was partly a way to overcompensate for his patrician background and instincts, as it was for Bush. In the future Baker would go with Willie Horton.

Immediately after Baker's loss, Bush called with the offer to manage his campaign. Baker and Bush mistakenly believed the main opponent would be John Connally. Connally, Lyndon Johnson's alter ego and Nixon's favored successor, was a Texas giant. Even though Bush had been the RNC chairman and Baker Ford's chairman, they were too parochial to grasp that Connally had no following among the Republican rank and file. Despite Reagan's near-upset of Ford, Reagan was dismissed as a has-been. "They never considered Reagan to be a threat. There was only one threat to them—Connally," said a political consultant whom they called on for advice.

After Bush stunned Reagan in the Iowa caucuses, Baker tried to air the issue-oriented television commercials he had prepared for just this moment. But Bush vetoed the strategy, intoxicated with his little victory. He would run, he said, on the "Big Mo'." In Nashua, New Hampshire, he accepted the invitation of the local newspaper to debate Reagan alone, excluding the other candidates, who announced they would show up anyway. Before the event, Baker counseled Bush to appear on stage and then graciously bring up the others. But Bush, according to a source who was present, didn't want to listen. Reagan protested the exclusion, the moderator attempted to silence him, and he uttered the immortal line of Spencer Tracy from *State of the Union*: "I paid for this microphone . . . " The debate went on, and Bush lost that too. Quietly, Baker separated himself from Bush's disaster. "I don't know what happened to George," he explained. Bush soldiered on, running a bitterly anti-Reagan campaign against Baker's advice, threatening to become the spoiler.

What was worse, in Baker's eyes, was Bush's peculiar relationship with Jennifer Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald ran Bush's office with a haughty air, bossing around everyone, but especially Bush, who seemed to delight in being rebuked in front of his associates. Baker was revolted. "Baker got the picture right away," said a former Bush aide. "She's an impossible woman, who exerted an odd influence over him, like a nanny." Baker, according to an old associate, delivered an ultimatum: "It's either me or Jennifer." "I'll take the weekend to think about it," Bush replied. Baker told others in the campaign he felt he had at last "faced Bush down," said the source. In a compromise, Fitzgerald was banished to the New York office. But when the campaign staff went off salary as Bush's chances petered out, Baker discovered Bush was paying Fitzgerald out of his personal account. Bush's secretary, the young heiress to an Alabama hotel fortune, Margaret Tutwiler, was livid. Upon learning the story, she rushed into Bush's office and "called him eight kinds of asshole," said a source who was present. Baker, in a gesture that could not be lost on Bush, hired her as his own secretary. From then on, Tutwiler was the most loyal of Baker loyalists.

While Bush fecklessly dashed around the country, talking privately about how he would make a last stand at the convention against Reagan, Baker wondered how to put an end to his campaign. He sent a young aide, Rich Bond (now the RNC chairman), to California to mislead Bush—



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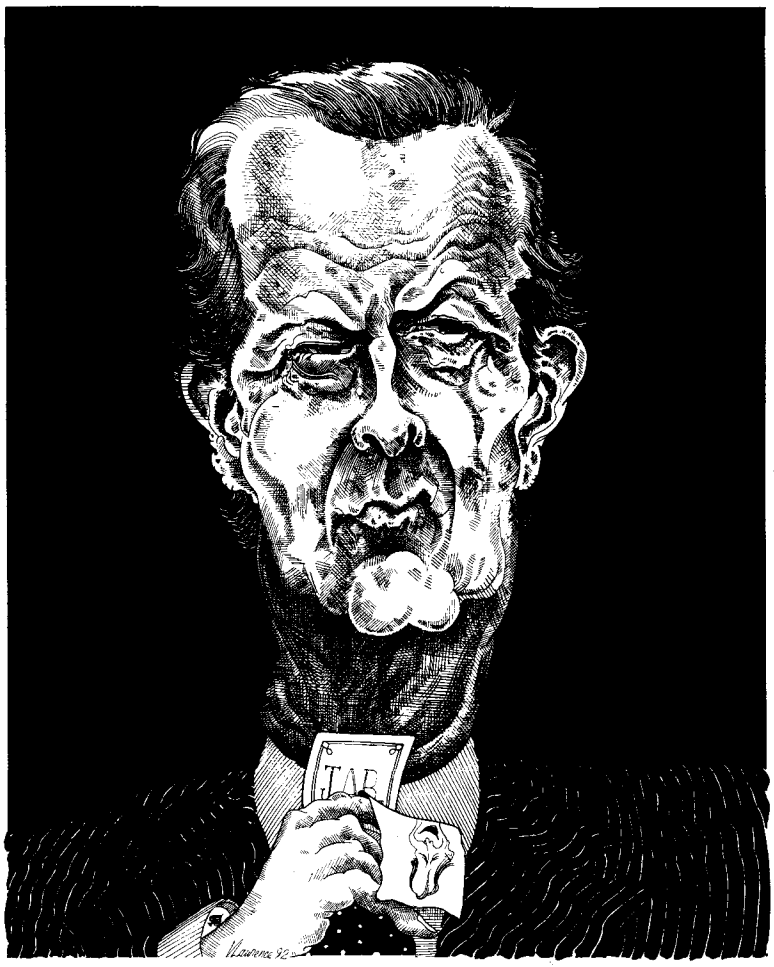
and the press—into believing he had an active campaign there. Then, when Bush was distracted, Baker announced he was terminating the candidate's effort in California, bringing Bond home. Bush learned that his campaign was effectively over from the traveling press. In a fury, he—and Barbara—railed against Baker. Eventually, after an exhausting meeting in Houston, Bush agreed to accept the inevitable. "I think everything is all right," Baker said in a phone call to an associate at 2:00 a.m. "I think he'll withdraw." Bush, however, believed he had been "misserved," said a former aide. In fact, Baker had saved Bush's career. If he had gone on attacking Reagan, he would not have been named his running mate. And, with that, the anger of the Bushes at Baker dissipated.

But Baker was shaken. "I'll never go through that again," he told a friend. "That was the worst experience in my life." The friend elaborates: "He wasn't talking about the campaign, but the relationship. A certain familiarity does breed a certain degree of contempt.... It's especially true if you think you know the guy and then you get into this proximity. You find a side you didn't see. It causes you to re-evaluate this person."

With Bush on the ticket, Baker's first request was to work for Reagan. He turned to his friend, Stu Spencer, who was trusted by Nancy Reagan, even though Spencer had helped Ford in 1976. Spencer shrewdly advised Baker that the crucial job would be debate preparation, and arranged for him to get it. Baker was vastly relieved that he would not be working with Bush. "Many were petrified in the Reagan campaign about the debate," said a political operative who worked for Reagan. "They were fearful Reagan was not up to it. Baker was handling a very hot commodity. If he saves it, he emerges as a big success. He also gets proximity to Reagan and other key players. He understands he's being watched. And he plays his usual role, extremely well organized, making decisions quickly and making them stick."

"This will be the guy," Michael Deaver recalls Spencer telling him. They understood that the central job in a Reagan White House would be chief of staff, and feared that Edwin Meese, legendary for his incompetence, would get it. His briefcase was called "the black hole of Calcutta." After Reagan won the debate, Spencer and Deaver planted the notion with Nancy Reagan that Baker might be persuaded to take the chief of staff job. She liked him because he made Ronnie look good, not only because of his proven capacity for organization, but because, as Deaver explained to her, he was experienced in Washington and was also "a gentleman." "Do you think he'd take it?" she asked Deaver.

From the beginning, Baker carried the taint of George Bush. The White House was a seething pit of intrigue, with Baker, who controlled the paper flow, and Deaver, who controlled Reagan's image, arrayed against the ideologues: Meese, Bill Casey (CIA director), and a succession of national security advisers, from Dick Allen to Bill Clark. The national press was relieved that Baker was in place in an alien administration. And Baker and his loyal aides (Tutwiler and David Gergen) took full advantage, regularly leaking damaging information about their internal rivals. The battle between Casey and Baker was particularly brutal, since each blamed the other for filching a Carter debate briefing book. At one heated point, Baker declared he was "not about to face a perjury rap" for Casey. In the meantime, Bush laid low. His office was next to Baker's, but, following Baker's advice, he hired no political staff. Baker did not want Bush to arouse hostility from the Reaganites for creating his government-in-waiting. This made Bush dependent upon Baker for nearly all of his political information. He spent a good deal of time being passed by Tutwiler into Baker's corner office. Back in Bush's own office, Jennifer Fitzgerald still ruled.



DRAWING BY VINT LAWRENCE FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Bush had campaigned against Reagan's economics as "voodoo." But it was now Baker's task to get the program enacted. The assassination attempt on Reagan's life and his graceful response helped remove obstacles in the House of Representatives. But no sooner had Reagan



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signed the bill than the worst recession since the Great Depression struck. Baker believed the administration could be saved by raising taxes. After long negotiations with Congress in 1982, he hammered out the largest tax increase in U.S. history.

In private, Baker had no use for Reagan's ideology, but he confided to associates and reporters that he had enormous respect for his negotiating skills. Baker marveled at Reagan's sense of when to give in and when to hold back, which almost always proved uncannily right. On cutting deals, Baker had the highest admiration. On everything else, Reagan needed careful handling.

But Baker was exhausted from the factional infighting. In 1983, after driving Bill Clark out of the National Security Council, he and Deaver attempted a palace coup that would have put an end to the battles. Richard Darman, Baker's deputy, prepared a press release that would have announced Deaver as chief of staff and Baker as national security adviser. But at a White House meeting unattended by Baker, Casey learned about the move and blocked it.

Though Reagan was coasting to a forty-nine-state landslide re-election in 1984, Baker felt spent. He even considered becoming the commissioner of baseball. Then he developed another plan: he and Don Regan, eager to be at the center of power but politically inexperienced, plotted to switch jobs. The deft maneuver was presented as a fait accompli to Reagan, who, ever considerate, asked only if that's what the two men really wanted.

Bush's campaign in 1984 had been near-catastrophic. After his wildly erratic performance in his debate with Geraldine Ferraro ("Whine on harvest moon!"), he was virtually sequestered—with the approval of campaign chairman Baker. Bush felt so despondent that he even thought of not running for the presidency. But he quickly overcame his moodiness. Baker, however, had set himself at arm's length away.

At the Treasury Department Baker sought avenues of success. He took up the banner of tax reform, which had been carried by Senator Bill Bradley and Regan, staging another festival of negotiation with Congress that produced a tax bill that lowered the top rate and closed a number of loopholes (but not for the oil industry, which Baker of Houston protected). In 1985 he forged the Plaza Accords with leading finance ministers, choosing the soft option of devaluing the dollar to spur exports. While Baker moved on the world stage, he was informed that the savings and loan industry was in deep crisis. He did nothing; the problem seemed sticky, likely to lead to a highly publicized failure. On a weekend in 1987, he threatened a rise in U.S. interest rates to counter high German rates; upon opening that Monday, the stock market crashed. Baker's remarks may or may not have contributed to the plummet, but he felt compelled to persuade that he had meant no ill effect.

Bush, by now, was in "deep doodoo," as he put it. He offered no rationale for his candidacy, and his negative rating had topped a toxic 40 percent. He begged Baker to leave his post to run his campaign. Baker refused, telling Bush that Reagan needed him at Treasury; further, he said he could help Bush more by making the global economy hum than by becoming his handler. A dejected Bush went to Reagan to ask him to release his best friend. Reagan held steady to Baker's line. Then Bush went to Baker's true political mentor—Stu Spencer. Baker refused again, but finally, having humbled Bush, Baker felt he could demur no longer. If he did, there might not be time to save Bush from himself—and Baker would never become secretary of state.

Bush, however, had a way of administering spite. The first decision he made after Baker came on as campaign chairman was to pick his running mate. He kept Baker guessing until an hour before unveiling on the *Cajun Queen* riverboat his notion of a protégé, Dan Quayle. "Not my choice," Baker told reporters tersely. He and his aides were furious not only at the selection, but at the fact that they would have to clean up the mess Bush had made. Baker put the tough Spencer in charge of Quayle. Quayle received rough treatment from them partly because he was an acceptable surrogate for them to vent their feelings about the wobbly Bush. Marilyn Quayle blamed it all on Baker.

Bush could not decide what he wished to campaign about, so Baker decided for him. He would not run a positive, programmatic campaign, but a harshly negative one. "Voters saw a side of Bush they hadn't seen—tough, decisive, manipulating conservative symbols," said a GOP operative who worked in the campaign. "That wasn't Bush, it was Baker. He decided that that would be the strategy; he decided to implement the script." One Republican consultant recalls being in Baker's office while he spoke on the telephone to Bush, who was evidently complaining that he was being forced to be too negative. According to the source: "Baker said, 'If you want me to run your campaign, you have to do it.'"

When it was over, with Michael Dukakis pulverized, Baker was rewarded with the plum he felt he would have had without ever having to sully himself with the campaign: secretary of state. But he wanted even more power. His political allies reflected the thinking in his circle by talking openly of Baker as "deputy president." The key would be the job of White House chief of staff. Baker's choice was Craig Fuller, who had been Bush's own chief of staff. But instead of Fuller, Bush inserted the abrasive John Sununu. "Bush hauled Sununu in there to keep Baker from having influence on that position, and left Fuller in the lurch as a result," remarked an influential Republican operative on the war among the princes.

As secretary of state, Baker finally attempted to wrest free of Bush. He wanted all his successes to be his own. So he declined to call upon former Secretary of State George Shultz for any advice, although Shultz had developed a warm relationship with his Soviet counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze. That relationship, which proved to be the central one for Baker, had to be reinvented from scratch.

Baker lucked out. In long, unusually frank talks, the Soviet foreign minister explained his deep feelings about



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the need for fundamental reform in the Soviet Union. Baker seized the opening and began to push a reluctant Bush through it. Shevardnadze's dismantling of Soviet power made Baker's diplomacy seem successful. But in his desperation, Shevardnadze was also able to manipulate Baker for his own purposes. He relied in dealing with Baker on a psychiatric profile provided him by a Russian analyst. The analyst told me: "In his mind he has a desirable image of himself, an image of future self, formulated by the demands of his father." But "whenever he reaches the next stage he's not happy. He transforms his activity into a gate to reach new positions." The analyst had a recommendation Shevardnadze followed. "Shevardnadze always stopped a half step behind Baker; Baker tried to be half step in front. It was a game. He gave an opportunity to Baker to perceive himself in the first position." The analyst also noticed Baker's relationship with Bush. "Baker may perceive Bush not as his friend, but as a very beneficial partner—a partner who helps him reach something.... Maybe he perceives him as a necessary element of his life, like meat or water."

When Shevardnadze resigned at the onset of the Gulf war, citing the threat of dictatorship in the Soviet Union, Baker was shaken. He had lost his compass. With Shevardnadze removed and Gorbachev in swift decline, Baker had power, but no policy.

Baker attempted to recoup his personal failure on the eve of the Gulf War by cutting a deal with Shevardnadze's replacement, Alexander Bessmertnykh. Without informing Bush, Baker issued a joint U.S.-Soviet communiqué pledging a bombing halt of Iraq in exchange for withdrawal from Kuwait—Bush's nightmare scenario. For both Bush and Baker it was a moment of embarrassed exposure. "He's never mad at me," Baker said the next day, after his deal had been summarily rejected. With the Gulf war, Baker was on the periphery of the action, though he was essential in acting as Bush's agent in rounding up the coalition, dispensing foreign aid and other patronage—Ford's delegate hunter on a grand scale.

In the wake of the war, Bush's re-election seemed assured. Baker had advised him to go along with the tax hike with the congressional negotiators. It seemed reminiscent of Reagan's tax hike; a recovery was sure to appear before Election Day 1992, and Bush could claim credit. But the recession deepened and the tax hike failed to make a dent in the deficit, which was exacerbated by the very S&L crisis Baker had ignored. And in the glow of triumphalism, Bush had no major domestic program to propose. After the Russian coup, the crisis of confidence that was emerging before the Gulf war exploded. In the primaries Bush was wounded by a challenge within his party from the right. Seemingly hapless, and after months of steep decline in the polls, once again he put out the pleading call for Baker.

Baker, undoubtedly, did not want to leave his cherry-paneled corner office in the State Department for yet another campaign as a handler. Baker even suggested publicly that Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney should become chief of staff to help Bush. But the president insisted he needed Baker. An hour before Baker's installation as chief of staff, Sam Skinner learned that he would be defenestrated. He was carted off to the RNC, which was being used as a mausoleum. Baker had waited to take his place in the campaign until after the GOP convention, which was disastrous and charged to the old handlers—essentially the 1988 team minus Atwater. Baker once again imposed his famous order. But the tried and true methods of the past were just not working. Baker barked commands, pulled chains, and pressed buttons—and nothing happened. He had Bush travel the country handing out federal largess, as Ford had. He heightened the negative attacks on Bill Clinton. And he met twice in his home on Foxhall Road with Ross Perot to size him up. When Perot re-entered the race, there were no more Bush broadsides. But none of these stratagems managed to lift Bush in the polls.

On October 5 Baker and Bush grasped at a straw. Representative Robert Dornan, a right-winger who had been flailing at Clinton on the deserted House floor as a "KGB agent," and his comrade, Representative Duke Cunningham, were invited to brief the president. According to an account in the *Los Angeles Times*, Cunningham told Bush: "Tokyo Rose had nothing over Clinton." Baker was reported to have laughed. "We cannot pick up the phone and use the power of this office to find the kind of information you're getting. You have to do it for us," he told Dornan. The next night, on "Larry King Live," Bush assailed Clinton for traveling to Russia as a student in 1969.

The danger now was that the shabbiness of Bush's campaign would seal Baker's reputation. Dornan had become, in effect, Baker's political operative. Worse, the mask had dropped. Baker was playing Roy Cohn to Bush's Joe McCarthy. So, on his rare television appearance, Baker went out of his way to distance himself from Dornan, whose farouche ideas he claimed he hadn't agreed to at all. Soon, one of Baker's friends predicted, "You'll read about things Baker's been against that Bush has done."

The final days have descended. Nothing seems to have inaugurated them more than Bush's announcement that Baker will be deputy president, the very notion Bush spiked when his power was fresh. Bush has always personalized politics and policy, with his phone calls, little notes, and wars against villains. Now he has personalized the succession, which would occur directly after his re-election. After searching for a larger rationale for years, he has found it. It is as if James Baker himself were the ultimate program George Bush is promising. In his panic Bush is revealing not simply his dependence on Baker, but his wish for his presidency to assume Baker's identity. This embrace, occurring more than a decade after Baker's initial disenchantment with Bush, is really a death-clasp, in which Baker may be the only one to escape to tell the tale. But unless he can win election as president on his own, this last gambit will be seen as the final extinguishing of his long reign of power. •



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# *Conservatives for Clinton*

## Joshua Muravchik

Much to my surprise, I'm supporting Bill Clinton for president. I've always been a registered Democrat, but I haven't been a Democrat in my heart for quite some time. When postwar liberal internationalism cracked under the strains of Vietnam, I made a simple rule for myself: I would vote for no dove for a federal office. I believed that to appease Communists was to invite peril. Although the cold war is over, I remain a foreign policy voter because peace and freedom remain the paramount questions. To some, the importance of foreign policy stands as the strongest argument for George Bush. To me, it settles the case for Clinton.

Bush prides himself on having overseen the dismantling of the Soviet bloc. "Reflect on what we've done," he said at the GOP convention. "The Soviet Union can only be found in history books.... I saw the chance to rid our children's dreams of the nuclear nightmare, and I did." Thus this leader who holds himself blameless for the woes of Detroit and Boston awards himself credit for the happiness of Lvov and Vilnius.

Bush, of course, is taking bows for a performance he did not give. The American who hastened the collapse of communism was Ronald Reagan, not George Bush. There were many internal reasons for the collapse: economic downturn, "new thinking" on the part of Gorbachev, heroic resistance by Solidarity and other dissident movements. But until Reagan reversed the momentum of the cold war, Moscow entertained no new thinking, dissidents were kept isolated, and economic woes were ameliorated by concessions from the West.

Doesn't Bush, who was vice president, share the credit for this? I doubt it. The Reagan administration was divided. Arrayed against the anti-Communist "ideologues" was a group of "pragmatists" who cared more for the budget balance than the military balance, more for nurturing commerce than husbanding lethal technologies, more for arms treaties than strategic defense, more for amity with Congress than arms for the contras. Everything we know about Bush suggests that he was among the pragmatists. But the definitive evidence against conceding Vice President Bush credit for the fall of communism is the record of President Bush.

When Chinese students demonstrated for democracy in 1989, Bush was inert. Throughout the confrontation between the students and the Chinese leadership, the watchword of U.S. policy was restraint. And after the students had been massacred, Bush dispatched emissaries to toast the butchers with bromides about Sino-American friendship. Bush has battled Congress with unwonted zeal against any infringements on Beijing's most favored nation status.

Bush's record on the European front is not much better. Where Communist regimes fell, Bush did not rush to shore up new democracies, but was stinting in his support, always with a finger in the air. I do not agree with those who criticize his loyalty to Gorbachev as the Soviet Union unraveled: Gorbachev was the principal engineer of communism's demise. But loyalty to Gorbachev did not require snubbing Yeltsin or warning freedom-hungry republics against "suicidal nationalism." Likewise the Bush administration declared itself in favor of Yugoslav unity, thus encouraging Serbia's bloody aggressions.

In his moment of glory, Operation Desert Storm, Bush spoke visionary words about a "new world order." The hope for any such order rests on the continued advance of democracy, because democracies behave more responsibly and peacefully. But Bush kept democracy off Desert Storm's agenda. Bush's Gulf war triumph is diminished further by the evidence now appearing of how assiduously his administration curried Saddam's favor until the moment he invaded Kuwait. Bush's courtship of Iraq was justified in part by the need to counterbalance Iran; but we have learned that we also courted Iran—through secret missile sales that then Vice President Bush countenanced—in part to counterbalance Iraq. Bush calls this foreign policy "realism." But since both of these regimes remain bloodily repressive, internationally mischievous, and implacably hostile to America, just what is realistic about it?

The twin pillars of foreign policy are strength and ideals. Bush has successfully maintained strength. But his deafness to ideals has rendered his policy incoherent, hollowing out the victory in the Persian Gulf and making us appeasers of the world's last Communist regimes instead of their grave diggers.

Will Clinton be better? In his stand on Bosnia, his advocacy of aid to states in transition from communism, and the emphasis he has given in his speeches to democracy and human rights, he has demonstrated a much better feel for the idealism that must inform U.S. policy.

As for strength, Clinton comes out of the Democratic Leadership Council, which resisted the currents of isolationism and appeasement within the party. On the Persian Gulf, of course, he fudged. But he seems to have learned from that experience, as evidenced by his readiness to use force in Bosnia. In his speeches he calls for an America "strong in arms" and a president "ready to defy and defeat those who threaten us." He also, alas, calls for spending $60 billion less on defense over five years than Bush proposes. At the same time the congressional Democrats with whom he associates himself—McCurdy, Nunn, Aspin—have been responsible on defense issues. The picture, in short, is mixed.

If Clinton takes to heart his own observation that "a strong America ... remains the world's best hope," he could fashion a foreign policy equal to the opportunities and dangers of the post-cold war era. This year I—like, I believe, a majority of Americans—plan to vote my hopes rather than my fears.

JOSHUA MURAVCHIK, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, is the author of *Exporting Democracy: Fulfilling America's Destiny* (AEI Press).

## John Frohnmayer

As a Republican who has been thoroughly disfranchised by the Republican platform and ticket, I am voting for Bill Clinton. My reasons are two: the first is leadership, the second the revitalization of the Republican Party.

George Bush may have the ability to get elected—to attack and divide, to turn neighbor against neighbor and race against race, to appeal to fear and self-interest—but it is those very tactics that, once in office, assure he will be unable to govern.

The president should motivate us to make tough choices and rededicate ourselves to our country. Clinton at least has that potential. George Bush has already shown us that he does not. Even when he had a 90 percent popularity rating at the end of the Gulf war, Bush failed to implement the programs that would heal America: in the economy, the deficit, housing, education, and communities. He frittered away that popularity, and with it any claim to leadership.

The Bush administration confuses self-interest with selfish interest. The selfish-interest politics that Bush practices—protection of those with wealth and power—can only separate us as races, economic groups, and sections of the country. The leadership analogy that makes sense to me is not Bush's football coach, exhorting his team to "kick ass." It is the image of the symphony orchestra conductor, coaxing the sweetest sounds from each instrument.

Now to the revitalization of the Republican Party. To wrest the party from the ideological headlock that the right wing has placed on it will take a thorough repudiation of the policies contained in this year's



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Republican platform. The platform's goal of integrating religion and politics (prayer in schools, laws reflecting faith in God, laws against blasphemy) is a piece of historical idiocy that not only jettisons the First Amendment, but also ignores the countries around the world that have tried such a unity with tragic and bloody results. The Republican platform's elevation of personal property rights over the good of the commonweal (for example, wetlands can't be preserved "at the price of disparaging landowners' property rights") reflects the sense, so prevalent in the '80s, that economic rape and pillage is the birthright of those able to accomplish it. The moral absolutism of the Republican platform makes no apology whatsoever to our differences, our cultural diversity, or our need for tolerance. It is cultural exclusionism. It is the electric fence school of social responsibility.

But most distressing about the conservative Republican pharisees is their desire to control our bedrooms, our minds, our art, and our beliefs. Classical conservatism teaches that each of those belongs exclusively to the individual. Not only has the Republican Party crumbled before these cultural terrorists, but in so doing it has lost its historical bearings and simply yielded to the voices that are the loudest, the nastiest, the most insistent.

President Bush is right when he says that Congress and the White House should be in the same party. Unfortunately he has proved that that party should be, for the short term, the Democrats. The greatest problems President Bush has faced in working with Congress have been from his own party. Jesse Helms, Newt Gingrich, Robert Dornan, and dozens of other Republicans have fought him on issue after issue, usually because the White House had no clear program. Repeatedly, the president has been unwilling or unable to exercise discipline over the Republican Party.

Finally, the Republican platform and the Bush administration leave me with no clear sense that they appreciate our obligation to future generations. The Republican platform's discussion of education is about school choice, prayer, and "teaching right from wrong," not about love of learning, self-realization, and risk-taking. Its discussion of the environment is virtually nonexistent. And in its hostility toward public broadcasting and the arts I sense no confidence in the intelligence of the American people. The Republican Party has lost the confidence that our leaders and our government can present us with the tough choices, can raise the expectations that we have of ourselves individually and collectively, and can cultivate a climate for collective success.

By my single vote for Bill Clinton I am expressing my hope for a new leader, young in spirit, who will challenge us to use our courage and ingenuity to attack America's problems. I don't want someone who promises no new taxes, I want someone who will lead us to solutions and persuade us to do what we must. And I am voting for a new Republican Party that will recognize that we all succeed or fail together.

JOHN FROHNMAYER is the former chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts.

## Arthur B. Laffer

Why vote for Clinton? We've had enough of Bush. On a personal level it's hard for me to go for the kill on Bush. He's truly a nice, well-mannered gentleman and a fine human being. Unfortunately, he has proved himself not to be a fine president.

Without reciting reams of statistics, Bush just hasn't come up to standard at home or abroad. The economy is reeling under his budget accord with Congress in 1990. And Bush is responsible for that budget accord. Although I may stand alone in believing that the tax increase of 1990 was the sine qua non of the current recession, I do and it was.

Bush should have known better. He was witness to Reagan's seven fat years where tax cuts brought America 18 million additional jobs, a quadrupling of the market value of America's productive businesses, and an astounding drop in both inflation and interest rates. Bush obviously just didn't get it.

In 1986, when he was vice president, Bush promised me personally that he would not countenance any reversal of Reaganomics. Two years later he took the same oath to the people. Again and again he reiterated publicly his promise not to raise taxes. I now believe he knowingly tried to convince me of something he himself did not believe. I believed him and campaigned for him at his request. This alone is sufficient to deny Bush re-election, and, to my screwed-up sense of values, comes close to warranting his removal from office on other grounds. Democracy ultimately can't survive widespread prevarication. And George Bush is a certified prevaricator.

On the international scene Bush is the recipient of a great deal of bipartisan praise. But even here I just don't see it that way. Saddam Hussein today thrives as Iraq's leader. And it was Bush's decision not to press the military campaign in order to depose Saddam.

Bush has also positioned the United States as tough on Israel. I guess it doesn't matter to him or to Secretary Baker that during all those years when American was sick with a bad case of national guilt and excessive state intervention, only one country never wavered in its support for us—Israel.

This surely doesn't make any sense to me, especially when you consider the alternatives to Israel: Rafsanjani's Iran, Assad's Syria, Hussein's Iraq, King Hussein's Jordan, Arafat's PLO, Qaddafi's Libya. The truth is that Bush looked good on the international front primarily because Reagan's policies came to fruition during Bush's watch, just as Bush was a beneficiary of Reaganomics.

On the other side of the coin is Bill Clinton. Although I do not endorse him for the presidency, he surely isn't, as one Bushie described him, the "candidate from Hell."

Clinton's record as governor of Arkansas is slightly above the average of other states and well above the average of Arkansas's immediate neighbors. He surely isn't a Mike Dukakis or a Jim Florio. Based solely on his performance as governor, Clinton would make a heck of a lot better president than George Bush has been. Bush has effectively destroyed the prosperity of the U.S. economy, while Clinton's Arkansas has muddled through modestly well during this period of recession.

I'm a little miffed at the attack on Clinton's lack of military service. What Clinton did back then was standard operating procedure for millions of young men at the time (although after four years of unfair Democratic attacks on Dan Quayle's service in the National Guard there is some ironic justice here).

In fact, the only tangible evidence that would harbinger a disastrous Clinton presidency is his *Putting People First* pamphlet. If Clinton were to succeed in getting these proposals enacted, they would, in short order, lead to major economic dislocations, losses in output, production, productivity, and a return of inflation.

On the bright side, however, they would guarantee the election of Kemp, Symington, Weld, or Engler in 1996. And this is perhaps the most important point of all. I cannot predict what a Clinton presidency will be like. But I can say that a great Republican presidency will follow in 1996 if Clinton strays too far from the straight and narrow. If Bush is re-elected, on the other hand, even 1996 looks bad.

So far, the tone of the Clinton campaign has really been quite reasonable, save for his irrational fear of Reaganomics. He speaks fondly of growth as if he means it. His ads correctly chide Bush for the 1990 tax increase, and so on and so forth.

All Democrats aren't bad and all Republicans aren't good. Bush is bad and Clinton just might be good. I'm voting for Clinton.

ARTHUR B. LAFFER was a member of President Reagan's economic policy advisory



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# BOOKS & The Arts

## *Stanley Kauffmann on Films*

### My Brother's Keeper

In one way John Steinbeck's **Of Mice and Men** (M-G-M) is like John Berryman's poetry: it's more powerful than, aesthetically speaking, it has a right to be. I saw the first production of Steinbeck's play in 1937 (well directed by, of all people, George S. Kaufman, the ultra-urban smartcracker, who reportedly had helped Steinbeck to dramatize his novel), the first film in 1939, the Broadway revival in 1975, and now I've seen the new film. The first experience was overwhelming; with later viewings, though the story was still moving, the mechanics became plainer.

For instance, in the opening scene Lenny implores George to repeat the daydream about the place with the rabbits that they'll have one day. Then George tells Lenny that, if he gets into trouble at the ranch they're going to, he is to come to this place and hide. Then the dead mouse in Lenny's pocket foretells more deaths (and justifies the Burns allusion in the title). Click, click, click, the pieces fall into place. Soon, Curley, son of the ranch owner, is set up as one kind of provocateur, Curley's wife as another. The putting away of Candy's old dog is not only a shivery prophecy for old Candy himself, it foreshadows another killing.

But, just as Berryman enthralls despite his limitations, so Steinbeck's work rolls on, rolls over us, like the well-constructed engine that it is. The power begins with the characters of the two protagonists: George, spryly competent, always grumbling at the burden of Lenny, always fiercely protective of him; Lenny, with the strength of an ox and the mind of a child, an absolutely innocent wrongdoer. Part of the power also comes from the inevitability of the ending. One of the reasons we hear about their dream place at the beginning is to inform us that they will never have it. And part of the power is in an old-fashioned bucolic feeling touched with the sordid—Currier and Ives with killings.

Story reminder: George and Lenny are California migrant workers in the 1930s. They travel together. George knew Lenny's aunt, who had taken care of the retarded man; when the aunt died, George took over. At the story's start, Lenny unintentionally frightens a girl in the town where they are working, and the two men have to flee.

They find work on another place farther south, where the boss's cockerel son has just married a sexy wife who is already restless. One day in the barn she teases Lenny, getting him to stroke her hair; and he doesn't want to stop. She gets scared and screams; he puts his hand over her mouth and, in his giant's fright, accidentally breaks her neck. He flees to the appointed place of refuge; George finds him there ahead of the posse that's in pursuit and shoots his best friend before the others can tear him apart.

Gary Sinise, who directed, plays George, and his performance is the worthiest element in the film. He has taciturn strength and a gift for conveying unexpressed feeling. He has played the role on stage, I've read, with John Malkovich as Lenny. Malkovich is again the Lenny here, and is quite disappointing. First, his hands. They never seem the hands of a burly, manual worker, hands of potential menace. Second, his speech. Certainly I can't rule that no retarded person speaks that way: I'm talking only of dramatic aptness. Malkovich sounds like a stock party imitation of a mental defective, done for laughs. This was not his intent, of course, but compared with Broderick Crawford, Lon Chaney Jr., and James Earl Jones in the role, Malkovich lacks entirely the aura of an earnest, bewildered giant.

Other roles, too, are poorly cast. Ray Walston's only qualification for Candy, the maimed old swamper, is that he is grizzled: he doesn't sound "country," and he lays on the pathos. Casey Siemaszko as Curley is a zero, and Sherilyn Fenn as his wife is negligible. A key role, Slim, the ranch foreman, was given to John Terry, who is good-looking and not much else.

Still, the fault doesn't lie entirely with the last three actors. Horton Foote's screenplay has whittled down all their parts, to the film's detriment. Foote even eliminates the penultimate scene in which Slim, a mature and compassionate man, guesses where Lenny is hiding and leaves, so that George can do what needs to be done, alone with his friend. The loss of

### FILMS WORTH SEEING

**Bob Roberts.** *Nothing new about American politicking, but writer-director-star Tim Robbins treats it all with pyrotechnical sizzle. (Reviewed 10/5/92)* **Glengarry Glen Ross.** *David Mamet's adaptation of his play loses a little force because the original was so truly a* ***play****; but trenchant acting by Al Pacino and others makes this foul-mouthed elegy for lives lost in salesmanship a high achievement. (10/26/92)* **Hero.** *A comedy-drama in Frank Capra mode about a lowlife who is catapulted into heroism, a drifter who grabs the honors, and a T.V. newswoman who supervises it all. Dustin Hoffman, Andy Garcia, and Geena Davis evoke (what else?) laughs and tears. (10/19/92)* **Husbands and Wives.** *As usual, a Woody Allen picture that would have been better with someone else in his part. But his script punches a lot of recognition buttons. (10/19/92)* **—SK**



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this scene is a detriment, too.

Sinise as director is no great shakes. The easy stuff comes off well enough—the pastoral landscapes, the great barley fields with the harvesting teams at work—but he wobbles in the intimate moments. Candy's appeal for his dog is handled heavily, and to weight it further, Sinise finishes the sequence with a long shot of Candy standing outside the bunkhouse all alone. The moment is not exactly subtle. After Lenny kills Curley's wife in the barn, Sinise puts in a high overhead shot of the two, one live and one dead—intrusive cinematics that fracture the grip of awful irreversible error. At the finish, when George shoots the kneeling Lenny, Sinise uses a long shot to show the two men. Again, too explicit. A medium close-up of George, more or less facing us, speaking to an invisible Lenny, with the shot and Lenny's crumpling invisible, is what, consciously or not, most of us might be hoping for. The drama, not the data.

The music by Mark Isham is even more coarse. Particularly in the pursuit sequences, it's Saturday-afternoon-serial stuff. Yet despite the various hobblings and hamperings in the film's making, despite Steinbeck's all-too-patent blueprint, the essence prevails. Perhaps *Of Mice and Men* is still affecting because of the authentic sweetness that George sees in Lenny and that he knows is doomed. Perhaps it's because the work can be taken as a monodrama, really about one individual, with the ego combating a kind of guileless id, finally suppressing it but with the knowledge of a certain prelapsarian loss. The ending moves us not to tears but to acceptance.

*Note.* Reviewing *Unforgiven* three weeks ago, I used the word "squaw." I learn that this word, once merely denotative, is now considered offensive. Regrets. •

## Magritte the Great.

# *The Endearing Truth*

### By John Updike

One does not expect that the Magritte exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art will be a humanistic revelation of considerable grandeur, but it is. What the revelation exactly reveals defies words, much as his paintings defied words. "This is not a pipe" ("*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*"), the most notorious of his pictorial inventions declared, beneath the ironically distinct image of a pipe. Magritte's unremitting philosophical attempt was to dislocate our assumptions about reality—to remove the viewer from the realm of easy, readily verbalized concepts into a realm of ideas that, he said, were "capable of becoming visible *only* through painting." The elaborate and literary titles his paintings bear were concocted not by him but by his surrealist friends, acting as a playful committee in weekly meetings at Magritte's apartment. He explained in a 1938 lecture:

> The titles are chosen in such a way as to prevent my pictures from being situated in the reassuring region to which people's minds would automatically assign them in order to underestimate their significance. The titles must be an extra protection which will discourage any attempt to reduce pure poetry to a trivial game.

His early paintings, once his experimentations with the styles of cubism, futurism, Purism, and art deco are past, confront us with a series of denials. Color is denied by a *grisaille* style in which browns and grays predominate. A muddy, underlit quality makes us feel the indoor gloom of a Belgian winter, and a stodgy adherence to the "local color" of nineteenth-century academicism shuts out all the spattery brilliance the Impressionists had unleashed. Painterly texture is denied by a greasy, rather edgeless handling of the pigments. "I always try," he said, "to make sure that the actual painting isn't noticed, that it is as little visible as possible." He helped support himself during the '20s and '30s by doing commercial illustration, and his paintings lose little in reproduction—indeed, some gain by it. For instance, *Time Transfixed*, with its smoking locomotive shooting like a stovepipe from the back wall of a fireplace, seems duller in the large original than when reduced, in the catalog and exhibit flyer, to an image

John Updike is the author most recently of a novel, *Memories of the Ford Administration* (Knopf).

**PHILIP ROTH:** "One of America's best kept literary secrets is that for more than three decades now...Mr. Stern has done as much to pry open the possibilities of the short story and the long story as any of his more illustrious contemporaries. Maybe with SHARES, the word will get out." ■ **SHIRLEY HAZZARD:** "Every new work by Richard Stern is a revelation, an occasion and intense pleasure. SHARES is the latest and one of the very best." ■ **J. COATES,** *CHICAGO TRIBUNE:* "Stern proves conclusively with SHARES that he can do just about anything with narrative forms, for this collection of separate pieces is so carefully arranged as to constitute a kind of metanovel of artfully contrasted variations on Stern's most compelling theme: fathers and sons." ■ **JAMES ATLAS:** "'The Illegibility of This World' is a small masterpiece that contradicts its title." ■ **A. GOLDBARTH:** "I tried hard, I really did, to find just one sentence that, in or out of context, didn't provide pleasure. Of course I failed." ■ **PUBLISHERS WEEKLY:** "Corrosively funny." ■ **BRUCE ALLEN,** *PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER:* "Richard Stern is a masterly creator of brainy, complex characters...'Shares' is a terrific story."

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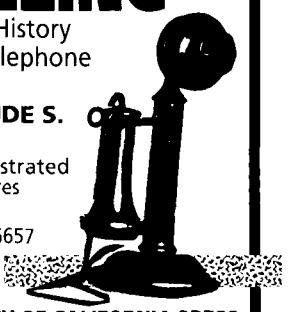

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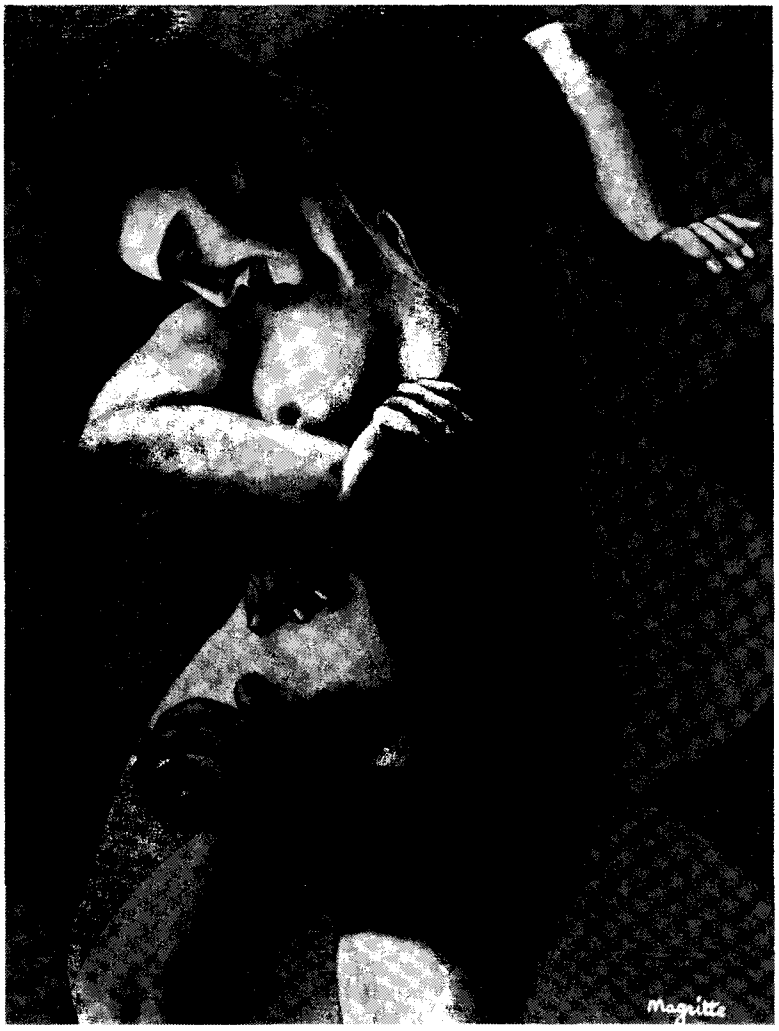
that can be grasped at a glance.

With increasing skill and deftness, Magritte's paintings deny us the perspective and material consistency we expect from the world. Sky and skin merge with wood grain. Holes open up in skies and walls and faces that reveal them to be no thicker than cardboard. "Despite the shifting abundance of detail and nuance in nature," he wrote in his memoir *La ligne de vie*, "I was able to see a landscape as if it were only a curtain placed in front of me." His landscapes are painted scenery: his first surrealist paintings coincide with a period, in 1925, when he was designing stage sets for an experimental theater. *The Difficult Crossing* (1926) holds flimsy stage flats and a curtain and props like a severed hand and a painted *bilboquet*—a piece of turned wood topped with a ball, one of his several curious but insistently recurring motifs. The painting itself, however, is a weak piece of surrealist clutter. A far more potent and concentrated picture painted the same year, *The Silvered Chasm*, satisfies and menaces the viewer with a sculptured consistency, a solidity within unreality; eyes that float free of spatial logic in earlier paintings are now shown as painted on a wooden block, their images turning the corners. An amorphous jigsawed hole, its perspective carefully rendered, opens onto a wrinkled metal wall decorated with another of Magritte's odd pet shapes—*grelots*, the small circular bells used on horse harnesses.




*THE TITANIC DAYS*, 1928

Though these paintings brim with a sense of human disquiet and of the hidden hand of *Homo faber* (even the sea seems an artifact, a painted backdrop), we are denied a sensation of human presence. Rather, human absence is portrayed. Heads are pieces of wood; faces are rapt in the absentia of sleep; the famous heads of *The Lovers* (1928) are wrapped in cloth; what faces do show are expressionless, impassive in their mutilation. Magritte himself, in his self-portraits of 1928 and 1936 (*Attempting the Impossible*, *Clairvoyance*), is expressionless, as he seems to be in the photos taken of him as a young man. The catalog text, by Sarah Whitfield, quotes a contemporary Belgian filmmaker, Jaco van Dormael, as saying, "Belgium is an absence of identity." The Communist leanings of Magritte's Belgian surrealist circle further de-emphasized individual identity and encouraged the group spirit of scientific inquiry. Magritte's man in a bowler is a kind of proletarianized bourgeois, a Wasteland cipher, and his own quiet style of life and painting, which he conducted in a corner of his house rather than in a separate studio, denied all Romantic and individualistic illusions concerning the artist. One of his circle, Louis Scutenaire, declared, "Magritte is not a painter," and another, Paul Nougé, said, "He is an *essentially* contestable painter."

Indeed, compared with Matisse, whose color-mad megashow dazzles the throngs thirty blocks to the south in Manhattan these days, Magritte is not a painter. Matisse's paintings, like Vermeer's and Monet's and Cézanne's and Pollock's, are about painting, the peculiar paradise of color applied to canvas; Magritte does not paint for paint's sake, as Matisse does. Like a self-abnegating medieval artist, he wishes to bring us through his subject matter into a realm of thought, of reconsidered being.

The eerie urban spaces of De Chirico and the deserts of Dali with their bejeweled hallucinations were too vague for Magritte's pedagogic intent. He was an advertising artist and learned to simplify his images, to deliver one startling blow to our grazing attention. The lovers kissing with heads enwrapped in cloth like burial shrouds, the giant apple or rose taking up an entire little room, the mirror that reflects a man's back instead of his face, the face that is a woman's torso (her breasts the eyes and her pubic triangle the mouth), the boots that are also bare feet, the tuba that is on fire, the eye staring from the round slice of ham on the dinner plate, the landscape painting that exactly covers, on its easel, the piece of landscape it represents—these are consummate posings of the problem of, as he said, "how we see the world." "We see it as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of it that we experience inside ourselves." Seeing is an epistemological puzzle in which "visible things always hide other visible things" and "our gaze always wants to penetrate further so as to see at last the object, the reason for our existence."

*The Titanic Days* (1928) is one of the few of his paintings about an experience rather than a perception. The experience appears to be rape: a naked woman is struggling with a man clad in a coat, who is only visible within her silhouette. The struggle therefore seems to be altogether within herself, and female erotic ambivalence is clearly implied by the painting's first, rejected title, *Fear of Love*. Magritte's female nudes in general seem to be about (among other things) themselves. The advances his painting technique made in the '30s can be measured in the distance between the naked torso in



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*A Courtesan's Palace* (1928) and that in *Representation* (1937). The first is a mere signifier, with a blocky anatomy and coarse skin, whereas the second is a real celebration, a silky mimickry of an Old Master, with a Renaissance reverence for the bared human form. In its form-fitting frame this abdomen, tawny as if under an aged varnish, becomes an icon, a sacred image.

Surrealism, like Freudianism, was full of sex; but Magritte's ominous eroticism perhaps needs a biographical gloss. When he was 13, his mother, after several unsuccessful suicide attempts, drowned herself in the Sambre River, which flowed past their home in the Belgian province of Hainaut—a drab region known as the Black Country. Her body was not recovered until seventeen days later, a kilometer downstream. Magritte seldom spoke of this misfortune, but according to an account he gave Scutenaire, "When the body was recovered her face was found to be covered by her nightdress."

This haunting detail may be a boy's garbled recollection of a disfigured corpse's concealment, or the projection backward of an adult's obsessions. In any case, the many veiled or absent or exploded or impassive or averted heads of the paintings here have a psychic source, as well as the ubiquitous female torso, whose breasts and belly and pubic bush press, limbless and headless, at the windows of Magritte's assemblages like a heavy vision of not quite attainable nurture. *Attempting the Impossible* is the title of his Pygmalion image—a self-portrait stiffly painting into existence his naked wife—and two other nudes from the same late '20s are titled *The Elusive Woman* and *The Hidden Woman*. To a child, at the outset of adolescence, the mother's suicide must have loomed as a deliberate and eternal denial.

As one moves through the chronologically arranged galleries, the paintings get jollier. *The Song of the Storm* (1937) makes us smile, with its tender joke of puffy clouds crawling along the earth beneath a clear sky showering rain, as do the reversed Madonna-Child heads in *The Mathematical Mind* (1936 or '37). The indoor murk lifts; Magritte's palette brightens. During World War II, to cheer himself up through the second German occupation of his life, he resorted to gaudy parody of Renoir, rendering a fleshy nude in a lurid rainbow of colors (*Treatise on Light*, 1943) and a godlike male *Ocean* (1943) against a messy Renoiresque landscape, with a miniature nude in the place of an erect penis. *Treatise on Sensation*, of a young


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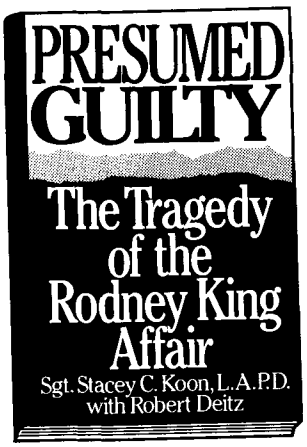


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woman in a woodsy setting wearing a dress that melts into her breasts, unwittingly demonstrates why surrealism tends to a photographic style; the viewer is uncertain if a physical anomaly is being represented or if Impressionistic blurring has let reality slip.

These Renoir travesties, so violently departing from Magritte's usual precision and reserve, were deplored by otherwise sympathetic critics, and are deplorably ugly—though not as ugly as the Ensor-like grotesques in oil and gouache, with giant noses and plaid skies, that came after the war. Yet some paintings in this cartoon style of scrubby paint and thick outlines have a new erotic ease; *The Pebble* (1948) matter-of-factly shows a bare-torsoed woman licking her own shoulder while caressing her breast, and *Lola de Valence* (1948) gives its nude subject a classic beauty. In *Olympia*, from the previous year, the female flesh, aglow with the kiss of the sun, is solid and sensual like few other figures in Magritte; nothing feels hidden but the question of whether or not a live mollusk is slimily present in the silver seashell placed on the reclining nude's belly, to her apparent delight.

All these divagations of style paid off, after 1950, in characteristic paintings done with a new spaciousness of effect. Absence, Magritte's original theme, became something like presence. A comic petrification, which seizes bottles and fruits and lightning bolts and men and lions, becomes the occasion of a triumphant return of congenial *grisaille*, in a flecked, skilled trompe l'oeil of stony metamorphosis (*The Haunted Castle*, *Memory of a Journey*). Huge boulders now, instead of trinkety *bilboquets*, serve as stand-ins for human presences (*Le monde invisible*). The clouds that always fascinated him have become, with an astounding aptness, floating loaves of bread (*The Golden Legend*). An enlarged comb and goblet and pencil and bar of soap make a snug bourgeois family in a room wallpapered with fair-weather clouds; this last painting was given the title *Personal Values* by Paul Nougé, but was originally called *The Clear Field* by Magritte. A kind of clearing had indeed been reached. *The Dominion of Light* simply sets a darkened street of houses against the bright sky that still reigns above; we do not even register, at first, the surreality of the juxtaposition, since such contrasts occur, if less extremely, in nature. The anonymous men in bowlers now float in a heavenly battalion, distributed above the gray tenements of Belgium as tidily as spots in three-dimensional wallpaper (*Golconde*).

All these were painted in the '50s; the '60s brought more superb recapitulations of his habitual motifs, amplified and unweighted. The world as stage, the metaphor of some of his earliest and least organized paintings, is now summed up as a continuous scroll of backdrop-thin sea and sky, terminating in a pair of curtains (*The Memoirs of a Saint*). The landscape within a landscape no longer disturbingly overlays nature with art but nestles art comfortably within nature—a canvas of trees set within a surround of leaves that one can imagine as clamorous applause (*The Waterfall*). The theme of the false mirror or window receives its culminating refinement in *The Field-Glass*: a double casement left ajar to reveal a strip of darkness, of *néant*, intervening in the splendid temporal illusion of sunlit ocean and sky. In *The Great Family*, the sky is now scissored in the shape of a bird, an image accessible and benign enough to be adapted, by Magritte himself, into an insignia for Sabena airlines—an apotheosis for the one-time ad artist. The hidden face, so fraught with trauma in its earlier manifestations, now belongs to the familiar man in the bowler, and is only partially obscured, by a drolly levitating green apple (*The Son of Man*).

The theme of hiddenness itself and the idea of a lost horse rider (a subject in 1926 and again in 1942) receive in *Carte Blanche* a fresh working in a stately piece of visual paradox, harking back to the selective silhouette of *The Titanic*

## *Saint Rock (The Cloisters)*

Man's best friend is—himself and the living God.
I, Saint Rock, stand accompanied by this shovel-jawed hound
with a loaf in his mouth. Admire the burl of my thighs,
the sinew of them, wrought from Norman poplars,

the legs of a walker who ventured far from a family
he did not get along with. (My uncle at Montpellier,
in fact, the one time I did try to return,
claimed I was an impostor, not the merchant I might have been.)

Admire the extravagant brim of my rain-proof hat,
and the gold trees figured on crimson in my doublet,
and the soft leather of the purse I wear for alms.
I lived in the woods, content with the company of elms

and oaks wrought with ivy, apart from my own kind.
But still I caught the plague. Were it not for the bread
brought me by that strange dog, and his knowing tongue
strong in my groin, I would not have lasted long,

once the frightful buboes began to rise like knots
in pale wood, once my poor hermit's stock of nuts
and berries ran out, once I yielded to delirium.
But his affection healed me. It was sloppy and warm,

dogspittle the only balm in my century,
though our Savior spat on his hands at Bethsaida,
and the blind man said at first he saw walking trees.
Once I lived willingly far from the cities

of men, but later all my woods came alive
with citizens fleeing the plague. They were figments; to drive
them from my sight cost me this wound. See, I will show
it to you, my legging rolled down to just below

its red, red mouth. I am not a good man.
I love neither my woods nor being human.
I am Saint Rock. In the desolate wilderness,
my wound cries out that I was saved for this.

**KARL KIRCHWEY**



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*Days*, that for all its dancing optical tease has the tranquillity of a tapestry or a Seurat. And, the year before he died in 1967, Magritte painted perhaps his most solemn and moving work of trompe l'oeil, *The Endearing Truth* (a punning translation of *L'aimable vérité*, from Boileau's dictum "*Le vrai seul est aimable*"). A niched stone wall holds the image of a table and cloth whose painted perspective recalls that of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, which Magritte had just seen in Milan. The table holds with sacramental simplicity bread and wine and a bowl of Magritte's green apples; the complex impressions the severely simple image leaves—of offering, of weathering, of simultaneous flatness and depth, of absence and presence—form a grand finale to the exhibit, whose last rooms produce such a stirring effect that another viewer spontaneously turned to me and exclaimed, "These are not dreams; they are the truth! Magritte was a philosopher! He was a *good man!*"

The excitement of these final rooms is enhanced by the three large pieces of sculpture they contain. In his last year, the catalog tells us, Magritte was approached by his dealer Alexander Iolas about sculptures being made of his images. Magritte, who had painted women on wine bottles and designs on plaster heads, consented, and offered eight conceptions in ballpoint sketch, which were executed in wax by a foundry in Verona. Though Magritte's hand did not do the modeling, he visited the foundry and made some alterations in the wax casts and signed them; they were cast in bronze two months after his death.

*Megalomania* embodies an idea he had first painted in 1927, of a woman's body in segments nested one within another. As a painted image, it is one more manipulation of body parts denied unity, of a body denied a head; as a large sculpture, it stands as a monument to the female form, as worshipful as a Malliol or a Lechaise—a magnificent telescope of a rump giving birth to a smaller abdomen giving birth in turn to an armless, headless torso. *David's Madame Recamier* is drier, a joke that substitutes a bent coffin on the famous chaise longue for her graceful body, but the joke goes deep. A photograph of the aging Magritte in these last rooms shows him smiling, and it is hard not to sense a joy of accomplishment in the last works displayed. Out of anxiety, uncertainty, and awareness of nothingness, he had generated images that, recurrently explored, acquired a resonant somethingness, an endearing truth. •

# *I Lost It at the Movies*

**By David Denby**

## Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values by Michael Medved

**(HarperCollins, 386 pp., $20)**

In *Hollywood vs. America*, Michael Medved makes a list of movies with scenes of vomiting. Then he makes a list of movies that have scenes of urination. "Waste fluids," notes Medved, "do indeed turn up with remarkable regularity in every manner of recent release." Nor does he slight interspecies intercourse (only one film on the list, and it hasn't been made yet), or incest, or cannibalism, both apparently flourishing in recent movies. Medved, a movie critic who has served since 1985 as co-host (with Jeffrey Lyons) of PBS's movie-review show, "Sneak Previews," demonstrates a true taxonomic zeal.

Medved's volume is not without a certain cracked interest. It resembles nothing so much as one of those inquisitorial handbooks of the Middle Ages that assembled checklists of heresy, thereby allowing local scourges to find error wherever they looked for it. His encyclopedia of sin is exhaustive. "Vomit and Urine," for instance, is merely a subcategory under the general heading "The Urge to Offend," which, in turn, is one of the sections of "The Glorification of Ugliness." Among the ugly things glorified, Medved includes the act of criticizing American institutions; roaches and maggots; and "foul language."

Medved says that he's against censorship, but by producing this bizarre catalog of outrages he clearly wants to arm


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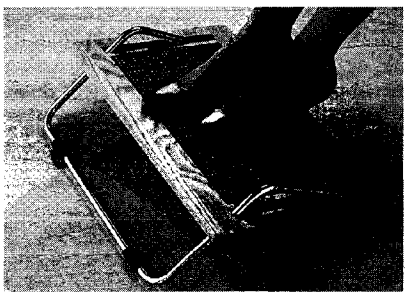

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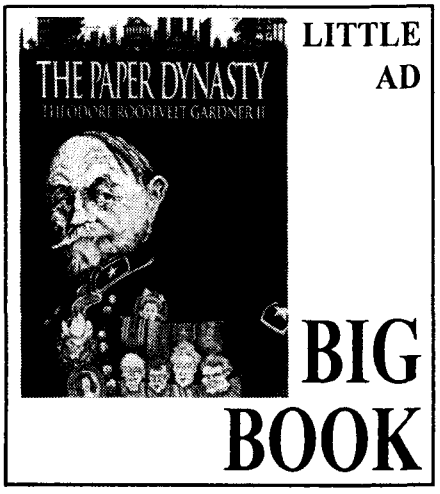
the many church groups and individuals—not to mention the organized political forces of the "cultural war"—who have become distressed by recent movies, television shows, and rock songs. According to Medved, the industries of popular culture (which he calls simply "Hollywood") have been overtaken by the urge to soil America. Hollywood is against religion, the family, the military. Popular culture is now all mire and filth, a dark landscape of dismay ruled by ideologically motivated producers and directors. Although Medved insists that the audience is leaving in droves, alienated by this assault on traditional values, he is still haunted by the specter of corruption: "The dream factory," he warns, "has become the poison factory."

Those inquisitorial handbooks demonstrated their value most admirably by allowing investigators to find error even when it did not exist. In the summer of 1991, three major Hollywood productions (*Dying Young, The Doctor, Regarding Henry*) offered protagonists facing illness and death, and yet, Medved tells us, "at no point in these proceedings ... did the main characters, or any of their friends or family members, turn for even one moment to the power of prayer, or ask to see a member of the clergy, or in any way evoke the name of God." The absence of prayer, Medved says, indicates Hollywood's "deeply held bias" against religion.

Now, there were many things wrong with these three movies, but had an entire interfaith council materialized in the wards and tended to the dying patients as well as to their "friends and family members," the movies would not have been a whit better. Medved also laments the absence of a film celebrating the Gulf war. A more conventional intelligence might think that Operation Desert Storm was too heavily covered at the time to yield a good movie so quickly after the event. But our critic discerns in the unmade film an obvious




box-office bonanza, a bonanza ignored out of "anti-military" bias. What Hollywood fails to do is now as grievous as what it does.

By bad popular culture, Medved does not mean bland, vacuous, or meaningless work. He literally means bad attitudes. It is not surprising, then, that in his chapters on movies, few films or directors of any note escape. In *GoodFellas*, his hilarious and frightening movie about petty hoods in Brooklyn, Martin Scorsese used profanity in manic coruscations, like rockets going off one after another. Yet Medved, reporting a count of the dirty words ("246 F-words, fourteen S-words ..."), dully scores the picture for excessive obscenity and then slaps the critics who voted awards for it; they reinforced "the idea that the finest in cinematic artistry requires a wealth of obscene dialogue."

Gus Van Sant's dreamy and funny little portraits of outsiders and screw-ups, *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, are convicted of twin heresies: they featured unpleasant characters and failed to attract large audiences. The nasty-characters-lead-to-failure-at-the-box-office rap also disposes of *The Grifters* and *Bugsy*. Arriving at Cameron Crowe's lovely teen-romance picture *Say Anything*, Medved initially describes it as "superb." But then Satan raises his pitchfork: the movie "throws in a subplot involving a typically corrupt and embarrassing parent." Without Medved's reminder we might not have noticed that this gentle film is part of the "anti-family agenda."

Medved's way with *Say Anything* is typical of his working method. He pulls a single character or scene out of context rather than trying to account for the effect of the movie as a whole. He never speculates on the psychology of response or assigns any particular weight to this or that element. After all, who but Michael Medved would believe that the cockiness of the Tom Cruise character in *Top Gun* turns the picture into an attack on military authority? Who else could even *remember* the urination scenes in *Medicine Man* or *Grand Canyon*? (As it happened, I had also forgotten Tom Hanks letting fly in *A League of Their Own*, but after Medved reminded me of the scene I realized that, in the context of the locker-room discomfort of a newly gathered team of female baseball players, it made perfect dramatic sense.)

Stacking up his evidence, Medved makes the foolish error of assuming that the effect of a film can be conveyed by summing up its plot. Since he is innocent of aesthetic interests or perceptions, these summaries carry his argument forward. For instance, the thriller *Sleeping with the Enemy* figures as a prime exhibit in the chapter called "Maligning Marriage." Married to an abusive creep, Julia Roberts fakes her own death and runs away, but the husband runs after her, and finally she kills him. The movie, says Medved, "is especially emphatic in its indictment of conventional wedlock as a cruel and unhealthy arrangement." Yet Medved neglects to inform us that before the husband shows up again, Roberts has fallen in love with another man, a gentle, bearded fellow, a fuzzie-wuzzie, who will certainly become her new husband after the story ends. Quite an indictment of marriage. And so is *Reversal of Fortune*, the story of Klaus and Sunny von Bülow, a movie that Medved cites as another example of the anti-marriage blight. (I'd like to meet the American couple convinced that this mordant portrait of leisure-class zombies is an assault on their own marriage.)

Apples and oranges, false contexts, misleading or dropped information: *Hollywood vs. America* is a handbook of intellectual ineptitude as well as of "degraded" messages in popular culture. There is hardly a kosher sentence in the book. Medved dissolves the actual world of pop culture, with its mix of scabrous and vapid imagery, its nihilism and warmheartedness, its eroticism and pastel-shaded reassurance, and replaces it with an entirely dangerous, and entirely moralized, universe of destructive influences. The necessity for such vigilance, he makes it clear over and over, is the survival of our children. In his publicity photos, he appears with his two little girls sitting in his lap.

If one momentarily ignores Medved's arguments and reads the book as the protest of a middle-class father against influences he cannot control, *Hollywood vs. America* has a certain pathos, even a painful authenticity. "You can put your T.V. in the closet," he says, "avoid movies altogether, and use earplugs to spare your ears from the sounds of rap or heavy metal, but these forms of entertainment will still change your life through their influence on everyone else in the society." The media, he says, are now inescapable.

This, of course, is true. Whenever I stop at a local newsstand with my two little boys, I have to answer their amazed questions about naked torsos spread across dozens of magazines. The cartoons that they watch on television are mostly violent, and the family sitcoms are filled with teasing, bullying jokes about teenage sex—nothing harmful, but hardly issues that they need to confront



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now. It's annoying when they and their friends pick up the "awesome, *dude!*" patter of those shows. But most of this stuff they will simply shuck off: what attracts them one year leaves them cold the next. Most parents try to plant the seeds of doubt and then withdraw, leaving the kids to develop their own tastes. After all, we grew up on popular culture, too, and some of us have lived to tell the tale.

But Medved the religiously observant family man ferreting out obscene lines from rap songs and summing up the graphic violence in obscure movies is a threatened and unhappy fellow—a prisoner of movies (more than six a week, he says). This Yale graduate sounds as if he hasn't read a good book in a decade. Medved is sloshing through waste fluids. Like those desperate fighters against pornography whose arguments begin to take on the reductiveness, the narrowness of perspective, and the claustrophobic obsessiveness of pornography itself, he has been corrupted by what he argues against. The note of prurience in his book is unmistakable. If he were not so viciously incoherent, so hostile to art, he might be someone to feel sorry for.

When Hollywood abandoned the Production Code in 1966, it clearly opened movies to a new candor and brutality, which has now spread to other parts of popular culture. What's not so obvious (except to Medved) is that the new rawness, which still appears in only a fraction of movies, T.V. shows, and music, is responsible for the economic decline of those art forms. In the case of movies, Medved seizes on the contrast between 1965 and 1969. In 1965, the last year under the genteel code, when the Oscar for best picture went to *The Sound of Music*, weekly attendance was at 44 million. By 1969, when the Oscar went to *Midnight Cowboy*, weekly attendance had fallen to 17.5 million (and has never risen above 23 million since).

In music, similarly, the audience, repelled (Medved says) by rap, has in recent years shifted away from rock to "easy listening" and country music. As usual he leaves out the context of any possible aesthetic considerations. He assumes that it's only the lyrics of rap that have turned people off. The disappearance of the melodic and rhythmic inventiveness typical of the Beatles and the Stones and a dozen other groups does not figure in rock's decline for him. Unaware that an art form may decline for anything but "moral" reasons, Medved assumes that other people's pleasures are ruined by the same things that ruin his own. The priggishness has an imperial reach.

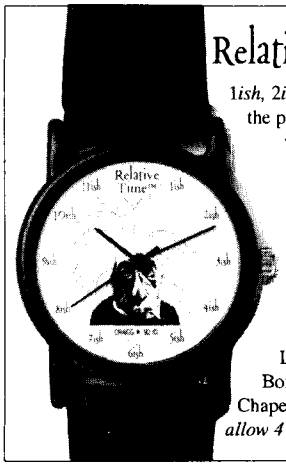
In any case, those people staying home or turning off their television sets would seem to be exercising a most effective form of protest. And who knows? Maybe they are talking to one another or even reading. Why worry about them? Certainly their disaffection will produce change in the industry sooner or later. Medved, however, doesn't say anything so rational. It turns out that this social conservative has no real faith in the market. Rather than correct a defect in the supply of cultural goods, Hollywood will continue to act against its economic interest—making movies that offend the audience—out of ideological commitment. The desire to insult the clergy, the family, and so on is overcoming Hollywood's legendary greed.

This is preposterous. Nothing overcomes greed in Hollywood, for the simple reason that anyone who is not *very* successful does not survive. The truth of the matter is more complex and less "ideological." As far as "values" go, Hollywood appears to be moving in two directions at once. Despite what Medved says, there is now a greater emphasis in the movie companies on "family entertainment" than there was a decade ago. (The feature-length cartoon, for instance, has been revived as a genre.) Medved, of course, can find things to complain of even in so genial a movie as *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (you know, it's anti-*parent*), but that's his problem.

I agree with him that a good number of the mainstream movies have grown crass, but the reason has little to do with ideology. In the real world of commerce, the immense rise in the cost of movies has led the studios to launch their products with mass bookings and expensive T.V. advertising campaigns. This has indeed demoralized the movie industry, but not in the way that Medved means. A violent "concept" movie "sells" in thirty seconds; a character drama does not. Movies that cannot be sold easily on T.V. tend not to get made—a crippling form of market censorship, leading in many cases to a gross simplification of the content and style of movies that do get made.

The number of people going to movies every week may have gone down (mainly because of the theatrical features on T.V. and cable, all the movies made for T.V., and the huge home video market), but the profits that can be made overseas have expanded, and that possibility, too, has caused movies to be made more crudely. Unlike a subtle little movie with an intensely American regional flavor, an Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone picture can be understood anywhere. (*Rambo* was successful in Beirut at the height of the civil war.)

Many people, obviously, are perfectly happy with the movies as they are.

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Medved is so resolutely middle class and genteel in his tastes, so hopelessly caught within his demagogic mentality, that he doesn't notice the pleasure other people take from movies. If a critic leaves the screening room and goes to Times Square or even the suburban malls, he discovers that many moviegoers love violent, nihilistic junk: it's precisely the deep-down crappiness of movies that draws them into the theaters. Blind to what a large part of the audience gets out of movies, Medved can't see when violent, edgy movies become more than simply junk; he can't see when they cease being junk altogether.

An alternate path for Hollywood, of course, would be to make a greater number of inexpensive and idiosyncratic films, and to sell them to segments of the audience (rather than to everyone) the old way, through newspaper ads (cheaper than T.V.) and "word of mouth." That's what many critics have advocated for years. But not Medved, who is unfailingly contemptuous of the small, independent effort that attempts to do something new. ("Idiosyncratic" is a term of opprobrium for him.) He is interested only in the big audience and the big studios. And what he demands from the studios is not better movies but cleaner movies.

But what, in fact, is the real effect of this malign popular culture? Sometimes Medved appears to believe it causes crime, divorce, and teenage promiscuity. But then in the next minute, trying to sound optimistic, he assures us that these things are diminishing. At his sanest, he admits that anti-social acts cannot be traced to the influence of individual works, and argues instead that bad popular culture adds to the degraded atmosphere in which such acts become more likely. A reasonable formulation. But if Medved possessed even a trace of sociological curiosity, he might wonder at the following: members of the Red Army, raised in the puritanical Soviet Union of the 1930s, in which little or no pornography was available, nevertheless raped women by the hundreds of thousands as they "liberated" Europe at the end of World War II. Japan, which makes the most violent, blood-soaked movies in the world, has very little street violence. In the Netherlands, where sexual materials of all sort are freely available and condoms are distributed in the schools, the rate of teenage pregnancy is one-seventh that of the United States. And so on.

Obviously a country's popular culture ranks well behind dozens of other social and economic factors as an influence on behavior. Medved quotes William Bennett to the effect that we could handle popular culture easily enough if the schools and families were working better, but he doesn't seem to understand what Bennett means. His own solution is the reform of popular culture itself. It must become positive, upbeat, and therapeutic. The theaters should be safe for our teddy bears.

To function properly, he says, Hollywood need only get back in touch with the audience. Again and again, he cites polls and dubious-sounding "studies" showing that Americans are quite satisfied with the way things are going. Crime rates and divorce rates are declining, he observes, so why so much mayhem and unhappiness on television? Why so much pessimism in the movies? He doesn't seem to realize that by insisting on a decline in crime rates, he is undercutting his occasional arguments for pop culture's deleterious "influence," but we'll let that pass. Behind all the pseudo-data that Medved invokes is an astonishing assumption that I've never encountered before in a critic. It is that movies should simply reflect the statistically determined average existence of Americans. If our family life is happy, then the families in movies should be happy.

If only the artists weren't in the way. The reason movies are getting marriage and crime so wrong, Medved says, is that the educated liberal elite in Hollywood is out of touch with the people between the coasts. (At Los Angeles parties, he makes a practice of asking Hollywood types if they know what percentage of Americans go to religious services regularly, and they *always* get it wrong.) But art, even commercial art, is nearly always created by some sort of elite. To complete even a junk movie or a sitcom requires extraordinary shrewdness and determination. How could it be otherwise? But the implication of Medved's harping on "elites" is that movies and T.V. shows should be made by ordinary people. In effect, he wants the mass audience to displace the filmmakers.

The most reviled person in *Hollywood vs. America* is the artist, particularly the artist who finds himself drawn to anything discordant or upsetting. Pessimism, Medved implies, is unpatriotic, because it spreads paralysis and an unwillingness to face problems. Anyway, says Medved, pessimism is just an affectation, a grab for status and awards. Directors who want to be "artists" think that alienation and profanity are signs of intellectual distinction, and the award ceremonies confirm this. Zhdanov himself could not have spoken more viciously about the danger of artists separating themselves from the masses. What vulgar nonsense. Whatever we may think of the failures of such minority films as *Ironweed*, *Salvador*, and *River's Edge*, they were hardly movies made by fakes. That Scorsese or Stone or even a schlock T.V. director might be possessed by his subject is inconceivable to Medved.

By his own admission, Medved has for some years worked on the side as a marketing consultant for Paramount Pictures, and though cruder moralists than he might imagine that serving the people whose movies you review amounts to a serious breach of integrity, he not only disagrees but appears to pride himself on his commercial savvy. Over and over, he names "anti-family" films or films with "unpleasant" characters that have failed at the box office. Medved is telling Hollywood: *you don't know your own business.* But what he doesn't point out is that most movies fail in their initial release (overseas and home-video revenues may push the films into profitability), including the kind of well-meaning, "positive" pictures that he would like to see more of. Hardly a month goes by without a few of them opening—earnest little movies about brothers, teenagers in love, families struggling to get back together again. Many of them aren't very good and they quickly disappear.

In all, this is the stupidest book about popular culture that I have read to the end. It is absolutely philistine in its assumptions and its judgments. Idiocies that Mencken hooted off the stage of serious discussion seventy years ago have now come back as a clarion call to "decency." How can one account for the book's appearance? How can a major publisher have brought it out? That Medved has become apostle to *Forbes* and *Reader's Digest* is no surprise, but ABC, *Newsweek*, and *The Washington Post* have also given him space to expound his views. Could standards of discussion in these matters really have fallen to the level set by Dan Quayle? Or is the book merely another (and relatively trivial) sign of the American demoralization in the '90s, a time when failure and defeat have brought forth quacks and morons armed with pseudo-solutions—demagogues who are indulged for a while because the real solutions are too complex or dismaying to face?

It is excruciatingly difficult to change a failing neighborhood or even a single block, to alter the reading scores of inner-city kids or eradicate racism or even save a marriage or make some good movies. But school boards and university administrators can be intimidated into such acts as adopting a multicultural curriculum or dropping the classics of the West from the readings lists, and movie

*continued on page 36*



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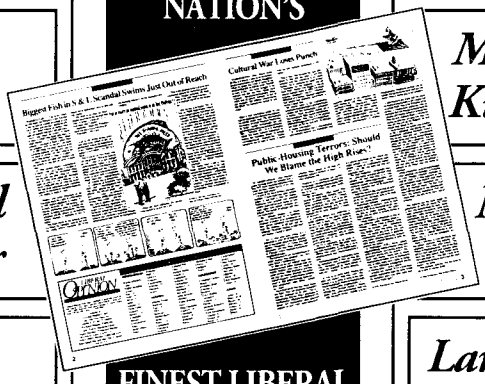

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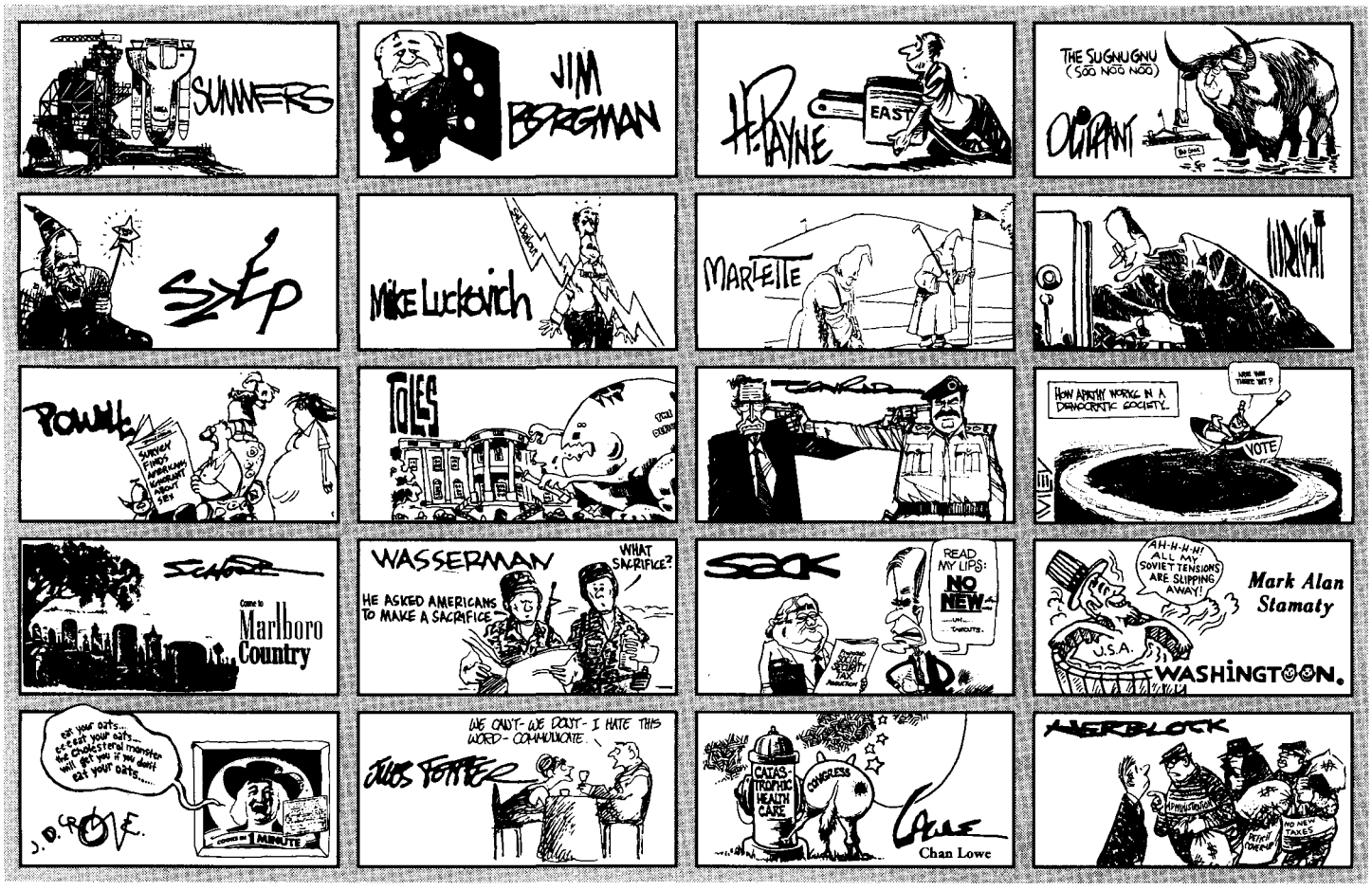


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companies can be forced to shelve a movie or alter an "offensive" scene. Such institutions are often run by liberals who want to be on the right-minded side of things. For groups locked in frustration, dismayed by the discordant life around them, guerrilla warfare on the culture front provides the consolation of action and access to the evening news. For a season, Medved's hot-under-the-turned-around-collar act might be a sensation.

For those on the right in particular, the '90s have brought a particular chagrin, sharpened by the election. The euphoria of the Reagan years has vanished: the market, it turns out, has not been able to solve all our problems, and perhaps it creates a few. Indeed, the truth that conservatives can never admit (for obvious reasons) is that capitalism pulls families apart as much as it brings them together, creates criminal envy as much as it satisfies honest ambition, and demoralizes as much as it invigorates. In the realm of culture, some conservatives like Medved appear to have given up on the market—which means giving up on its greatest cultural achievement, freedom.

Most of us would say that accepting junk, even nihilistic junk, is the price we pay for giving freedom to artists. How can one guarantee the freedom of artists without guaranteeing the schlockmeister's freedom as well? Medved, however, has no interest in art. Over and over, he says, "There isn't any art—it's all self-indulgence." The pop-culture industries have made a botch of freedom, and now they need to be pushed into doing what they should be doing, which is to prop up middle-class institutions. A critic shall lead us! Disrupt the board meetings! Boycott the sixplexes! Religious groups should not hold back, they should make movies themselves! Medved has yet to realize that pressure groups can produce only one thing, and that is pressure. Good movies, which he professes to love, can be made only by those unreliable and pretentious showoffs, those pessimistic and mire-obsessed clowns, the artists. Like it or not, he is stuck with them.

DAVID DENBY, film critic for *New York* magazine, is working on a book about rereading the classics.

# *Taming the Black Dog*

**BY LAWRENCE LIPKING**

## The Letters of Samuel Johnson edited by Bruce Redford

**(Princeton University Press, 3 vols., $29.95 each; vols. 4 & 5 forthcoming)**

Reading these volumes is like visiting the pyramids. First an imposing physical presence swims into view. The sheer bulk would be intimidating, were it not for the elegant design and sumptuous open spaces—wide margins, a meandering Nile of notes—that invite a leisurely approach (paper this thick asks to be stroked). Next a visitor might admire the industry that has made all this possible. Bruce Redford's deft and knowing editorial labors draw on a legion of scholarly haulers and diggers. In the forty years since R. W. Chapman's edition of Johnson's letters, fifty-two more letters or parts of letters have turned up, and thousands of facts about Johnson and those to whom he wrote or referred have been added to the pile. This monument rose one bit at a time. But finally we come here in order to brood on the past. Somewhere inside are clues to mysteries, and above all the remains of one frail human being. What sort of person was he? Were all his works a strategy for cheating death? And what was the real story of his life?

Johnson inspires such questions. More than any earlier writer—and maybe any later one—he has tempted readers to think that they know him and to want to know more. It is not that he is so forthcoming. Indeed, one reason for the fascination he exerts may be his reserve. He never signed his name to a work until he was almost 40, and hardly ever used the first-person singular until the world sought him out. Yet the formality of his style does not discourage a sense of intimacy. Perhaps it even challenges readers to penetrate the screen. Conventionally a lexicographer is swallowed by words and has no life at all; but the great English *Dictionary* (1755) established Johnson as a hero whom everyone wanted to meet. He is the first celebrity of English letters, the hack who became a star.

Yet Johnson, like any writer, lived many lives. His story depends on who is telling it and the genre in which it is told. This is most obvious in the wealth of biographies. Boswell's Johnson, the Hercules who overcomes a lifetime of trials, differs from the fallible Johnson of Sir John Hawkins, who weighs the virtues and faults of his old friend like a judge at the bar, and from the cranky personality—man of a thousand anecdotes—recorded by Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi. More recently, John Wain has celebrated Johnson as a professional man of letters, and W.J. Bate has explored his psychology as a representative modern man and survivor. But all these lives do share a certain perspective, that of the memorialist. Retrospectively they see Johnson's life as a whole, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The story is finished, the destiny rounded off. Every biography has a similar plot.

Other kinds of writing convey other senses of life. Even the most assured autobiographers, for instance, cannot be sure that they have wrapped up their stories. The last page always leaves room for afterthoughts and codicils, a life to be continued. Such memorials cannot be carved in stone. When Johnson sketched some autobiographical "Annals"—the surviving fragments break off at the age of 11—he conceived them as an exercise in memory, checking his reminiscences against the facts or what he was later told. They are interesting not for the larger story they tell but because they remind us how memory actually works: skittishly saving a milestone or making one up, jumbling times and wiping out people and places, holding on tight to a single favorite spoon. Insofar as our lives consist of what we remember, like the scenes that flash by as the car skids toward a tree, they cohere no better than dreams. That is why writers work so hard to contrive a good ending.

Johnson imagined most lives to be quite inconclusive. His fiction stresses the journey, not the destination; his biographies review the choices that people make, but leave final judgment to God and the reader. Most of all he harps on the daily moral grind, the minute, innumerable distinctions between virtue and vice that define the character of a moral being. In this respect it is Johnson's essays, more than *Rasselas* or *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, that embody his practical sense of being alive. Moment by moment *The Rambler* breaks behavior down into its principles, until the whole world seems an arena for the battle of the mind against dark forces, not least its own. Nor does the author stand apart



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from that struggle. To those who know how to read him, Johnson is always present in his moral essays, as his own best example of the hopes and fears he dissects. This ready sympathy disqualifies him as a satirist. Despite the irresistible humor he casts over human folly, the laugh is on him as well, and never ends.

Nor does he forgive himself for being human. At its most naked, Johnson's sense of life is written down in his diaries and prayers. There, as in a confessional, he reviews his conduct before the one audience that can never be deceived and measures his failings against a standard of perfection. Life does not get harder than this. The writer assumes the vantage point of a heavenly spy, a recording angel more pure and prolific than even Clarissa, who does not relax attention for an instant and always finds just the right words to pin down the sinner. Johnson thought of melancholy—not modern pensiveness but "a kind of madness, in which the mind is always fixed on one object"—as his familiar companion; he called it his "black dog." It might also have been an angel, or a vulture.

Yet Johnson knew the remedy as well. "What will you do to keep away the *black dog* that worries you at home?" he wrote to Boswell. "The great direction which Burton has left to men disordered like you, is this, *Be not solitary; be not idle*: which I would thus modify;—If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle." Society and busywork will chase away the dog. "There is a letter for you," Johnson concludes.

A letter seems just the right form for such advice. No other sort of writing is more social, more busy. In a letter a solitary person can sustain the illusion of talking to someone, of adapting each thought to one particular friend; in a letter, whether for business or pleasure, an idle person stirs into action. Familiar letters, like telephone calls, often serve no purpose except to announce their own existence. You wanted a letter, the writer says, and here it is. We use them (or used to use them) to check in, to stay in touch, to keep our friendships in repair. Good correspondents learn the art of making something out of nothing. Each shift in the weather, the smallest occasion, redeems a tiny piece of time from solitude and idleness, filling an otherwise blank page with notations of another mind humming along somewhere. Wish you were here. For many writers, letters have been the best society, a chance to open the heart with no hazard of back talk.

Hence writing letters can be a way of life. The eighteenth century explored that life to the full. No other age produced better correspondents, and some of the best, such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Horace Walpole, never seem more alive than in the flush of what Johnson rightly calls "epistolary intercourse." Good postal service changed the nature of human relationships. Moreover, it also transformed prose fiction. An extraordinary series of epistolary novels, from Aphra Behn to Choderlos de Laclos, showed how flexibly letters could catch the finest movements of consciousness, the intimate drama of those exchanges in which people move and manipulate one another. Many readers believed these characters were real. At the same time, the variety and depth of fictional correspondence encouraged readers to pay more attention to their own sensibilities. Rousseau's Julie and Goethe's Werther seemed to feel more in a day—even a day when nothing much happened—than most people do in years. Naturally this raised the stakes of letters. To live more and write more became two halves of one consuming aspiration.

The interest in letters changed biography too. Once the habit of saving, collecting, and rereading correspondence came into vogue, it was an easy step to organize a life around such material. William Mason's *Memoirs of Gray* (1775) brought this method to England, and Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) amplified it by reporting conversations. But each hesitated to make private messages public. (Mason disastrously thinned out Gray's caustic wit.) While a life in letters has the advantage of using the subject's own words, it also tends to be riddled with gaps. We do not write to the people we see every day, and the discretion of the survivors blacks out the juiciest bits. Nor do many writers like to think that posterity will be peeking over their shoulders. Many famous literary careers conclude with a ritual burning of letters. Johnson alerted Boswell to a more ingenious scheme: "It is now become so much the fashion to publish letters, that in order to avoid it, I put as little into mine as I can." But Boswell had the last word: "Do what you will, Sir, you cannot avoid it. Should you even write as ill as you can, your letters would be published as curiosities." Letter hunters, like paparazzi, manage to catch celebrities off guard.

Johnson did not carry out his threat. He put a good deal of his life into his letters, as well as wisdom enough for any reader. Nevertheless this correspondence lacks the charm of such masters of the art as Montagu, Walpole, Gray, Cowper, Byron, and Keats. One reason is that Johnson does not enjoy writing. A large proportion of these letters are chores, and read like chores. He thanks a friend for a favor, asks for money or information, handles a business matter, recommends an acquaintance for charity or employment, settles a date or a debt, reports on his health, extends his sympathies, and offers consolation. All this he does very well, and sometimes—especially condolences—superbly. But duty drives his hand. Some authors seem to revel in the act of writing. For Henry Fielding, or Jacques Derrida, the

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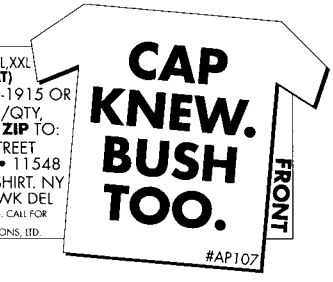

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flow of words glows with the self-approval of fertile invention. Johnson is not like that. Often he seems more like a bear roused from hibernation. The thrill of going a little too far, of the hand outrunning the brain, very seldom breaks loose in these letters.

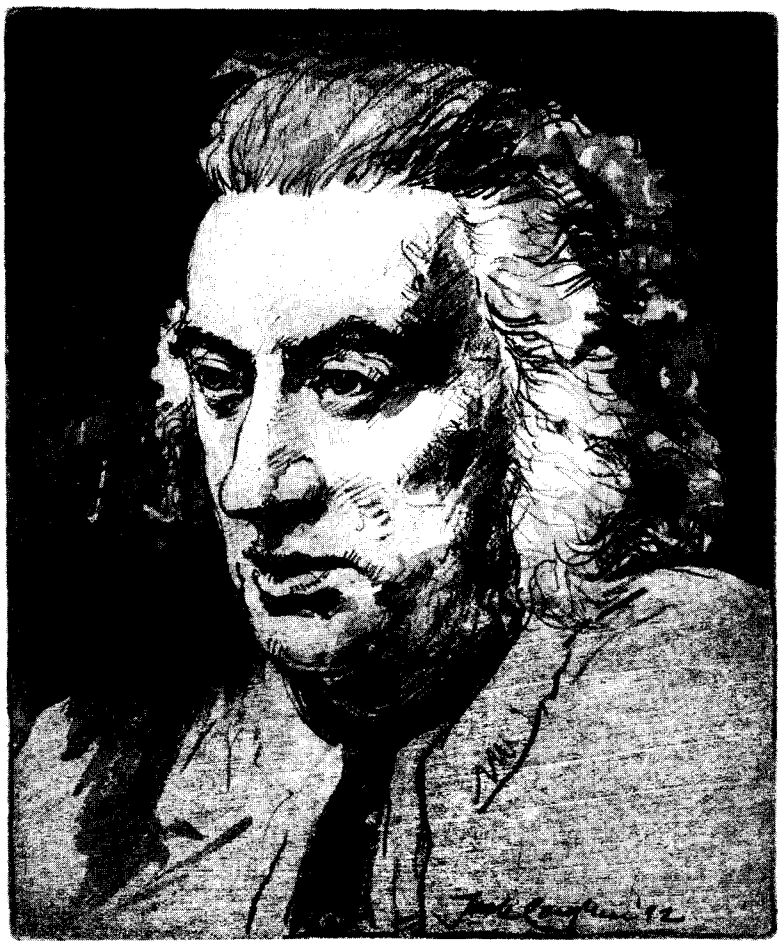
There are two main exceptions, and both are wonderful. The first consists of form letters that touch something deep in Johnson, so that he uses all the resources of the form to define himself. Some of the condolences reach this height of art, conveying both personal grief and the accepted formulas of comfort, as in a (previously unknown) letter to Mary Cholmondeley: "We all live on this condition that the ties of every endearment must at last be broken." A better-known instance—indeed, the greatest form letter in English—is the response to Lord Chesterfield. Embalmed in some anthology, this performance might seem to have always been meant for the canon, like any dead classic. But in fact it sizzles not only with class hatred but with the excitement of an author discovering who he was born to be.

Rebounding from Chesterfield's patronizing praise for an unknown, uncourtly scholar, Johnson accepts the persona with a vengeance. "To be so distinguished is an honour which, being very little accustomed to favours from the Great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge." But every word shows off the writer's mastery of terms. Turning the bread-and-butter letter inside out, the client lords his independence over the patron:

> Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of Learning I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less, for I have been long wakened from that Dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation, My lord, Your Lordship's Most humble, most obedient Servant,
>
> SAMUEL JOHNSON.

No courteous bow has ever been more disdainful. The crushing irony is Johnson's signature; nobody's servant, this writer stands on his own. He will be that humble, unworldly scholar—and also a hero.

The role had been anticipated in the *Dictionary* itself, which added a few lines from the *Greek Anthology* to the definition of "grubstreet": "Hail, Ithaca! after many labors, after bitter suffering at sea / gladly I touch your shore." The joke cuts two ways. On the one hand the lexicographer acknowledges his own insignificance; Grub Street is home. On the other he identifies with Odysseus, the canny warrior who is never more dangerous than when he masquerades as nobody. Suitors like Chesterfield will soon feel the arms that lurk beneath these beggarly clothes. In the letter Johnson goes public. He reveals the violent pride that has smoldered in obscurity so many years and now flashes out in the author's assertion of power. The grubstreet Odysseus has landed.



SAMUEL JOHNSON BY JACK COUGHLIN FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

The other exceptional set of letters was written to Hester Thrale. Their exchanges bring out a part of Johnson that might otherwise never have surfaced: loving, happy, tender, and eager to please. When he first met the Thrales, in 1765, he was 55 and she not quite 24, about twelve years younger than her husband, a prosperous brewer. Soon the couple befriended, then virtually adopted, the lonely and often gloomy literary giant. She became the daughter he never had, the surrogate mother who held him in line, his sparring partner, the keeper of his secrets. He grew into a member of their household and warmed his life in a benign and unexpected Indian summer. The Thrales were always in his thoughts, as he confessed in 1777:

> I cannot but think on your kindness and my Masters. Life has upon the whole fallen short, very short, of my early expectation, but the acquisition of such a friendship, at an age when new friendships are seldom acquired, is something better than the general course of things gives Man a right to expect. I think on it with great delight, I am not very apt to be delighted.

Hester Thrale especially gave him delight. A lively and witty conversationalist, she was also a talented writer, and both sides of the correspondence (hers is not included here) show that he could count on her to pick up his literary allusions and read between his lines. The relationship changed Johnson's life in more ways than one. Besides the comfort he found in the Thrale family, he also found a reason to sift through his daily experience for whatever might be interesting and amusing enough to enliven a letter. He notices birthdays and berries and bulls and balloons, and chases off brooding with gossip. The world comes back to him. Johnson often envisioned life as an allegorical journey, but when he tours the Hebrides his reports to the Thrales brim over with rough seas and rocky roads that are anything but allegorical. Taken out of himself, he watches life minute by minute. His health improves; his mind goes out to his friends.

He even *likes* to write. "The want of money," Johnson once told Hawkins, "is the only motive to writing that I know of." Nor does he trust the cheerfulness and frankness that authors like Pope profess in their letters. "Very few can



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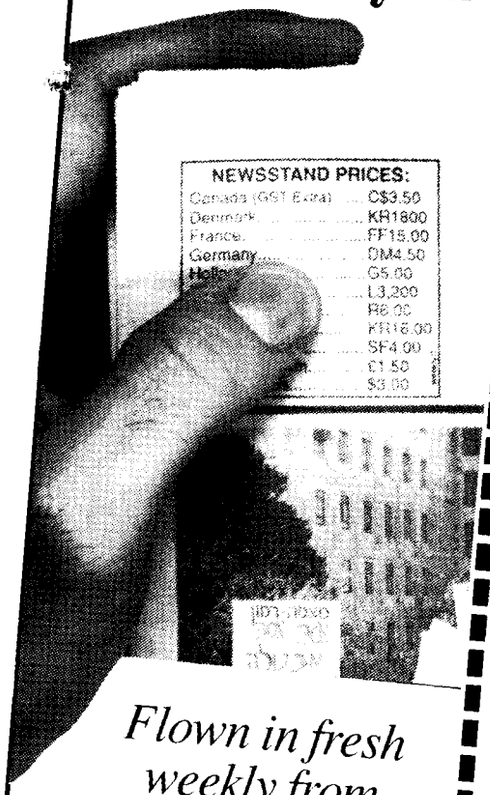


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boast of hearts which they dare lay open to themselves, and of which, by whatever accident exposed, they do not shun a distinct and continued view; and certainly what we hide from ourselves we do not shew to our friends." A hilarious letter to Hester Thrale plays many variations on this theme; it parodies the cult of sincerity by adopting its phrases:

> In a Man's Letters you know, Madam, his soul lies naked, his letters are only the mirrour of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process.... Is not my soul laid open in these veracious pages? do you not see me reduced to my first principles? This is the pleasure of corresponding with a friend, where doubt and distrust have no place, and every thing is said as it is thought.

Johnson himself knows better. But so, he implies, does the woman who is his soulmate. In a peculiar way, this letter suggests the very possibility of a sharing of hearts that its own irony mocks. One reader at least will be in tune with its insight and humor, and will understand that human nature is never transparent. These friends are close enough to recognize the limits of friendship. Hence Johnson enjoys the true pleasure of correspondence, a friend he can trust to like him even when he tells the truth. His pen flies over the page.

Eventually it stopped. A reader who finishes the first three volumes of these letters had better be warned about what is coming. Johnson wrote more and more letters as he grew older, but the pleasure leaks out of them. Ominous shadows fall over the end of Volume 3. Henry Thrale dies; an Italian musician, Gabriel Piozzi, proves more successful than Johnson at consoling the widow; gradually things not said encroach on the correspondence. Worse is to come in Volume 4. As Johnson feels Hester Thrale's fondness slipping away from him, he loses the perfect pitch of their earlier friendship; endearments turn into entreaties. Most of his letters, to her and others, detail complaints about his failing health. Then her marriage to Piozzi in 1784, five months before Johnson's death, brings about a final rupture. The ailing and jealous old man did not take it well: "If You have abandoned your children and your religion, God forgive your wickedness."

A last, very moving letter slightly relents; it seems to put a seal not only on the friendship but on Johnson's hopes for his life. "I wish that God may grant you every blessing, that You may be happy in this world for its short continuance, and eternally happy in a better State. And whatever I can contribute to your happiness, I am very ready to repay for that kindness which soothed twenty years of a life radically wretched." Yet the break was irreparable. He wrote no more, he drove her from his mind and burned some of her letters, he would no longer be soothed. All that remained was to set his affairs in order. Mrs. Piozzi had more to look forward to. Her new life opened the way to a literary career, sparked by her reminiscences of Johnson; and three years after his death she published their letters (suitably doctored). Thus the end of his story launched a new chapter in hers.

What moral might Johnson himself have found in these volumes? I do not think he would have mistaken them for the last word on his life. Letters are useful for catching a moment on the fly, not for connecting parts into a whole. Cumulatively they witness only that "the world is full of ups and downs" (Johnson reporting that his flatulence has come back). Nor does anyone's series of letters end well. Even if the hero polishes off some famous last words, he will not be around to write them down. The best a reader can hope for is a Comprehensive Index (Volume 5), allowing easy access to some favorite bits. The heart of this pyramid holds no key to the meaning of life—only a missing body, the smell of the past, a jewel or two.

Yet Johnson always found morals. When Imlac visited the pyramids, in *Rasselas*, he taught his royal companions a somber lesson: "It seems to have been erected only in compliance with that hunger of imagination which preys incessantly upon life, and must be always appeased by some employment.... I consider this mighty structure as a monument of the insufficiency of human enjoyments." To live in the present moment is never enough; we invest our hopes in the future, in pyramid schemes. Nor does Johnson exempt himself. Every author feeds on dreams, he frequently notes, and this author knows how it feels to wake up hungry. The enjoyment of living does not content him for long. No one would have been more alert than Johnson to the disparity between these monumental volumes and the patchy, unsettled spirit that they preserve. But the writer we visit in them is still alive.

LAWRENCE LIPKING is the author of *Abandoned Women and Poetic Tradition* (University of Chicago Press).

# *Family Secrets*

**BY SVEN BIRKERTS**

## Before and After by Rosellen Brown

**(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 354 pp., $21)**

The title of Rosellen Brown's latest novel, *Before and After*, is misleading on a literal level: apart from a short impressionistic evocation of the Reiser family in happier days, the book is really focused upon *after*, on what transpires in the private and public lives of that family as the horrible facts of a killing come to life. But in the deeper sense, which is the sense toward which the narrative would steer us, the circumstances are in every way related to the *before*, to the assumptions about life once fostered by the Reisers and the members of their community.

Before, the chronological before, is given in a three-page prelude, a series of flickering images drawn from old home movies. "The little boy's smile is so wide, sun in his eyes, that he seems to be crying." This would be Jacob, the son. And the little girl, "all dressed up, her fair hair shining," is Judith, his younger sister. Then we see a blond woman and a bearded man: Carolyn and Ben, the parents. They "turn to each other at one point, just after the large shadow of a passing family darkens them like a cloud, and, as if they were clasping hands, grin at each other above the heads of their clowning children."

The reader does not need to be gifted with second sight to know that all will not go well for this little group. The cheery ominousness belongs to television melodrama. Here is the bustling family getting ready for the day, or the mother making plans for the child's birthday party.... And sure enough, straightaway in the first chapter, Carolyn, a self-possessed and hard-working pediatrician in the New Hampshire town of Hyland, is called over to look at a body



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that has just been brought into the emergency ward. A teenage girl has been severely bludgeoned. Her skull has been crushed, "collapsed like a beer can, one of the younger doctors indelicately put it." In a matter of hours Carolyn will discover not only that her Jacob may have been involved with the girl, Martha Taverner, but that he was very possibly her assailant.

The novel moves quickly through its opening crises. In short chapters that are parceled out between Carolyn and Ben (Judith's perspective is added later), we track the first jolts and aftershocks: the appearance that evening of Fran Conklin, a local police officer, who needs to ask some questions; the non-appearance—which soon becomes the *dis*appearance—of Jacob.... Then the clincher. Ben searches the trunk of the boy's car and finds a bloodied jack. There is a moment of terrified recognition, but as soon as it passes he sets to work, destroying every last shred of evidence.

Brown hews to psychological verisimilitude, racing through the confusions of the first days and then decelerating. This, we say, is how it is with tragedies. First the haphazard tumble of news, the realignment of assumptions and expectations, then the interminable waiting. And indeed, it is only as the import of Jacob's disappearance starts to sink in that the novel discloses its true preoccupations. *Before and After* is only circumstantially about the crime and its punishment. The real focus of inquiry is on ethics and what might be called the metaphysics of family life. We butt up against the big questions: On what basis do we determine right and wrong? What are the bonds between individuals, family members, and citizens in a community? How are those bonds sustained, how are they ruptured? And, perhaps most pressingly, what do we ever know of other people—even those to whom we are bound by blood?

The mystery of Jacob's disappearance is eventually solved. He is picked up by police in Cambridge and later released to his parents on bail pending trial. Back on home ground, he moves about in a stunned silence, a revenant. The fact that he gets no chapters of his own intensifies our sense of his inner distance from the others. His isolation within the family more or less mirrors the status of the Reisers in the community. There are snubs, cutting remarks, and anonymous telephone calls. Carolyn loses so many of her patients that she decides to take a leave from her job. Then one night Judith gets a ride home from a friend and confronts a flaming cross in the yard: "After so much that was mundane, and so much innuendo, the muttering under the surface, this was extraordinary. It was huge and clear, God talking from the mountain: *Thou shalt not kill.*"

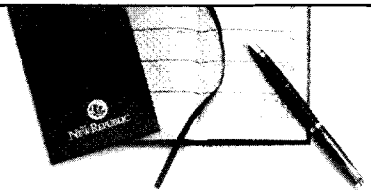
Relations between the Reisers and their neighbors grow predictably more strained as the trial nears. What is less predictable, but emerges as the core tension of the novel, is the moral standoff between Carolyn and Ben. For in time Jacob breaks his silence and confesses to his family: he did kill Martha in a fit of blind rage, he is guilty. In Ben's mind the course is clear. He has already destroyed the evidence, now they must cook up a story for the trial. The book's epigraph, from Pascal, explains his moral justification: "When one does not love too much one does not love enough."

Carolyn feels the implicit reproach of Ben's position. She, too, loves—but she loves differently, more reflectingly. She is unable to think only of Jacob. While Ben is a sculptor and househusband, Carolyn's vocation has exposed her to a larger world of suffering. She has seen parents in agony over their wounded children. She remembers Martha Taverner as a delicate child and has no trouble connecting with the grief the girl's parents must be feeling. Since there is no law protecting her from testifying, she decides that she will have to tell what she knows. Her truth will go up against Ben's. Carolyn refuses to accept the logic of their lawyer, Panos, who says,

> Carolyn, *screw* what really happened! What's it going to take for you to get this? "The truth" in a courtroom is just a construction of effects. It's *theater*.... Either side can skew the way things appear, and how they appear is all that matters.

Pascal and Panos: the reasons of the heart versus the cynical manipulation of appearances. Carolyn and Ben must navigate between these two poles. To say much more, or to explain how the struggle is resolved, would be to strip the second half of the novel of much of its propulsion. Suffice it to say that all members of the Reiser family end up as pilgrims in the harsh land of *after*.

*Before and After* is a tightly paced novel. Its conflicts have been orchestrated to expose the tangled root system underlying all acts of moral choice. Yet in spite of this—because of this—the work fails. It is at once not enough and too much. Had Brown been content to play out the sensationalistic possibilities of her subject, there would be no problem. She would not have set herself up to be judged in these terms. But her decision to move the focus of inquiry inward,

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away from the more garish temptations, proves her undoing. Though the novel generates its own local heat—given the premise, it would be hard not to—it fails on follow-through. The reader is stimulated, even compelled, by the crisis and its consequences. But stimulation is not gratification. As soon as the covers are closed, the heat dissipates.

Not enough and too much. I mean that Brown has neither discovered nor created real characters. Carolyn, Ben, Jacob, and Judith are utterly without the singularity, the sap, that would let them possess the page. They all have their pedigrees, their pasts, and their basic identifying mannerisms, and all but Jacob are given the chance to express their emotions to the reader. Yet for all that, and despite the immense pressure they are seen to be under, there is not a spark of real life in any of them. The voices fail. They reach to a certain depth—the depth at which generic characters live—and go no further. Brown, like so many of her contemporaries, has put her trust in the voice continuum, that non-individuated drone-aquifer located just under the crust of the collective imagination. The author summons up a type and then lets idiom and convention take over.

Listen for a moment to Carolyn, who is driving with Ben to Cambridge to work on getting Jacob out of police custody:

> She needed a cup of coffee to steady herself; they were, God knows, in no hurry. They drove until they began to recognize buildings, as if, in the neighborhood of the jail, they had been lost in the woods. Around Putnam Square, Ben found a parking space. The musical chairs of commerce kept replacing shops and restaurants with fresh alternatives—this year's fashions in cuisine and apparel achieved their fifteen minutes of fortune, if not exactly fame. Every time they came down to Cambridge they discovered that an old hair salon had become an antiques shop or a hardware store had yielded to a bagel bakery. They headed toward something new called Café Olé. Their favorite army-navy store (where Carolyn remembered finding a canteen and a set of flares once for Jacob's Boy Scout trip) had become a wondrously green flower shop, a dash of tropical green that looked as if it should exude its steamy sweetness right out into the frigid street.

To be sure, there is nothing really wrong with this prose. It hovers between exterior narration and interior monologue, situating us somewhere near the periphery of Carolyn's psychic envelope. The problem is that there is not a fresh phrase or a distinctive rhythmic turn anywhere. The prose simply cannot put us into contact with what we could believe is an actual person. The sentences glide on, drone on, saturated to the core with the kind of hip attitudinizing that may pass for consciousness in certain circles. I get no feeling of life. And if I blast at Brown for stuffing her novel with so many pages of this riffing, I must likewise go after a whole echelon of contemporary American fiction writers. For this kind of writing, the signature of creative halfheartedness, is epidemic.

My concern here is not with prose style alone, but also with the ways that style constrains or enhances the creation of character. Character may be destiny, but to get the fictional character positioned for a destiny requires a great deal of imaginative—and stylistic—penetration. Prose like the above will never kiss the dust awake. The reader greets at best an animated census figure, a Jane or John Q. Public with some attributes pasted on.

Which brings me to the "too much." To put it most simply: Brown's subject has possibilities that far exceed what she has been able to realize. To embark on the big themes entails a certain artistic responsibility. But Brown is not willing to go the distance. We are led to raise all kinds of primary questions, but we are not given the materials we need to forge our answers.

The Reiser family is nearly torn asunder, but because we have not encountered its members at any depth, we are not allowed to feel the true fear and pity of their situation. Brown raises the issue of knowability, for instance—how well do we finally understand those who are closest to us?—but does not know where to take it. Here is Ben, reflecting:

> You buy the toys, you close him in the yard where he's safe. And you think you know the whole set of characters in his head, the scary parts, and the sweet dreams. Only, one night he has a nightmare. It rips his sleep in two, and yours as well. You rush in, pull him from his crib as if it's on fire and comfort him against your shoulder—and he can't tell you a thing.... He's never had a trauma. Spontaneous combustion is what it is. The little microbes grow in the warmth of his head, the moist medium.

Which means what, finally? Is Ben acknowledging the existence of evil in the world, or is he just confessing his own stupefaction? It's not clear. And since this reflection bears so vitally on Jacob, on the fact that he bludgeoned his girlfriend to death with a tire jack—and kept bludgeoning long after she was dead—it is clearly central to the thematic weave of the work. We are prompted to ask not only the general questions about knowability, but also the more specific question: What would lead a boy from a nice family to explode in this way? It is not enough to say that other lives are sealed enigmas, but that is where Brown has left it.

The author does, at one point, attempt to expose a vein of gratuitous cruelty in Jacob's character. She has Judith relate to her mother an incident she once witnessed: Jacob was methodically stoning a dog that had been tied to a tree. "Carolyn was too stunned to pursue the details. Did he have another life? This couldn't be Jacob. He was never cruel!" Sorry, but this is not good enough. And yet this is where, philosophically and psychologically, we are stranded. To answer the question about Jacob, a question as urgent as Raskolnikov's, Brown would have to create a character—indeed, a family of characters—who could support the reader's sustained inquiry. She never does—the promise of the Pascal epigraph comes to naught. Brown has cracked open a set of issues vital to all of us, but she has failed to find the language, and through the language the lives, that would allow her to explore them at depth.

SVEN BIRKERTS is the author of *American Energies: Essays on Fiction* (Morrow).

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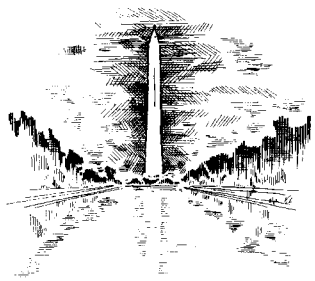
# WASHINGTON DIARIST

## Quilt

I FIRST SAW THE AIDS QUILT three years ago, on its last trip to Washington, when it was only a few thousand panels in size and fit comfortably in the Ellipse in front of the White House. Last weekend, at 26,000 panels (one-sixth of the number of deaths in the United States so far), it filled most of the vast space between the Washington Monument and the Reflecting Pool. Neither experience was forgettable; and neither still even faintly morbid. Like the Vietnam Memorial, a few minutes' walk away, the quilt has to be entered in order to be understood; a piece of interactive architecture of both public and private space. But unlike the Vietnam Memorial, the quilt is a buoyantly colorful, even witty, monument. It doesn't immortalize its commemorated in regimented calligraphy; its geography is not that remarkable, black snowdrift of casualties, but a kind of chaotic living room, in which the unkempt detritus of human beings—their jeans, photographs, glasses, sneakers, letters—are strewn on the ground, as if expecting the people to whom they belonged to return. People walk over this cluttered landscape, looking like tourists, caught between grief and curiosity, saying little, peering intently down at the ground. As you approach the quilt from the rest of the Mall, toward a place where tens of thousands of people are congregated, noise actually subsides.

THE PANELS THEMSELVES ARE tacky and vital, and therefore more chilling: you are invited to grieve over faded Streisand albums, college pennants, grubby bathrobes, cheesy Hallmark verses, and an endless battery of silk-screen '70s kitsch. Unlike the formulas of official memorials, each panel manages to speak its own language in its own idiom; you have to stop at each one and rethink. Camus suggested in *La Peste* that the most effective way to conceive of large numbers of deaths was to think in terms of movie theaters, but the quilt dispenses with such mind games by simply reproducing shards of the lives of the fallen, like overheard, private conversations. Some panels are made by lovers, others by parents, friends, even children of the dead; and some are made by those whose names appear on them and speak with uncanny candor. "Life's A Bitch And Then You Die," quips one. Even the names themselves rebel against any attempt to regiment them. In the program, some people are identified with full names, others with first names, others with nicknames. There are sixteen Keiths; and one Uncle Keith; twenty-eight Eds; one Ed & Robert; eighty-two Davids; one David Who Loved the Minnesota Prairie; one mysterious David—Library of Congress; and one David—Happy Birthday. Some go only by two initials—T.J.; others spell it out in full—Dr. Robert P. Smith, Arthur James Stark Jr., HM1 James T. Carter, USN; others are reduced to symbols—five stars (unnamed) "commemorating five theater people who have died"; still others are summoned up by nothing but a baseball cap and an epitaph. Celebrities, of course, creep in—I counted four Sylvesters and twenty-nine Ryan Whites—but they are scattered randomly among their peers. The most piercing: Roy Cohn's. A simple inscription: "Bully. Coward. Victim."



THE DEMOCRACY OF THE PLAGUE is enhanced by the unending recital of names over the loudspeaker, as friends and relatives and strangers read out the death roll. The names resonate with metronomic specificity, adding an aural dimension to the visual litany. "Patrick J. Grace, Dan Hartland, Ron Lopez, Edwina Murphy, Mark Jon Starr, Billy, Kim John Orofino, Frank, Bob Flowers, Sergeant Rick Fenstermaker, U.S. Marine Corps ..." Many of the two-minute recitations end in "and my brother and best friend" or "my sweet little sister" or some such personal touch. From time to time, a mother's voice cracks over "my precious son and best friend," and the visitors to the quilt visibly stiffen at once, their throats caught in another, numb moment of unexpected empathy. I bumped into an acquaintance. "What's going on?" I asked, lamely. "Oh, just looking for friends."

JUST WHEN YOU'RE READY TO sink into moroseness, however, the panels turn on you. Since this act of remembrance is one our public authorities have not sanctioned (neither President Reagan nor Bush walked the couple of hundred yards to visit the quilt), it is mercifully free of decorum. Drag-queen creations—taffeta, pumps, and pearls embroidered across silk—jostle next to the overalls of manual workers and the teddy bears of show-tune queens. There's plenty of bawdiness, even eroticism, and a particularly humanizing touch you don't find in cemeteries: a lot of the spelling is wrong. Many of the epitaphs have a lightly ironic edge to them, coming close to a kind of death camp: "The Fabulous Scott Tobin"; "Dennis. We Didn't Get To Know Each Other Very Well, And Now We Never Will." My favorite panel ornament was a Lemon Pledge Scent furniture polish can. Others simply shock you into reality: "Hopefully the family now understands" inscribed beneath a pair of someone's jeans; "For the friend who still cannot be named—and for all of us who live in a world where secrets must be kept." And another: "You still owe me two years, but I forgive you and will always love you. I never located your parents. Maybe someone will see this and tell them."

THE POINT OF IT ALL, OF COURSE, is not merely to release grief, but to affirm the dignity of those who have died so young and in the face of unique public disdain. For many of the families who came to D.C. last weekend, the event was the end of an extraordinary journey to grapple not simply with their loved ones' deaths, but with their lives. A few short years ago virtually everyone I saw at the quilt was gay. This time the presence of families—predominantly heterosexual—was overwhelming. These were ordinary people who through their loved ones' deaths were asserting, beyond their own sorrow, the overcoming of their own shame. Being there was a catharsis not simply of the horrors of the disease, but of the bigotry that stalked so many of those on the ground and, by association, those who reared them. This is one way in which AIDS has surely changed America. With the collapse of the closet, a collapse accelerated by HIV, attacks on gay people are now attacks on our families and friends as well. They will no longer go unanswered. "I have done nothing wrong. I am not worthless. I do mean something," as one panel put it. "This is my beloved son," echoed another, "in whom I am well pleased."

**ANDREW SULLIVAN**



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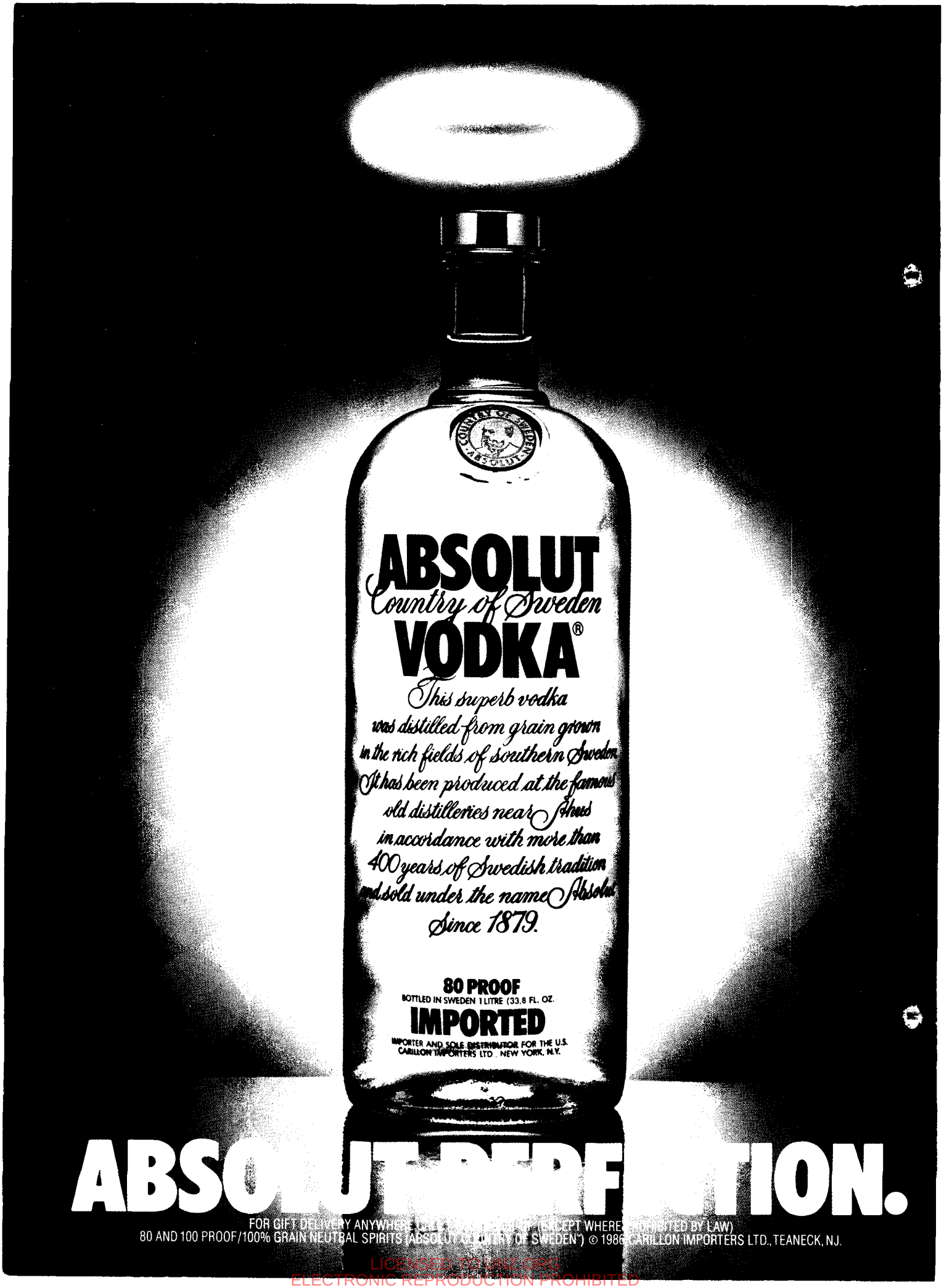
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